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The Ways of Esau

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered December 1960)

At the beginning of this morning's Sidra, we find Jacob awaiting the fateful confrontation with his brother Esau. Jacob is apprehensive – even terrified – as he prepares for Esau who is advancing upon him with four hundred armed men, with vengeance and murder in his heart. At this point, Jacob decides to divide his retinue into two separate camps. His reason, according to the Torah, was that should Esau destroy one camp, at least the other would escape and survive.

Allow me to bring to your attention an additional reason for Jacob's strategy, one suggested by the eminent Hasidic master, the author of the *Sefat Emet*, in the name of his renowned grandfather, the Kotzker Rebbe. He bids us read a bit further, when Esau and Jacob finally do meet. Esau ran towards Jacob, embraced him, fell upon his neck – *va-yishakehu*, and he kissed him. The word *va-yishakehu* is written with a series of dots on the top of it. This is rare in the Torah, and when it does occur, it indicates that there is a deeper meaning that must be searched out. That our Rabbis did, and Rabbi Yanai taught: *melamed she-lo bikesh le'nashko ela le'nashkho* – Esau did not intend to kiss Jacob, to give him a *neshikah* or kiss. He did intend to give him a *neshikhah* – a bite, a mortal wound. He embraced him, and then fell upon his neck in his characteristically wild, bestial manner in order to kill him. But, by a miracle, Jacob's neck turned hard as marble, and so Esau – kissed him. It was a hypocritical kiss; a kiss not of love but of death, not of affection but of affliction.

These are the two ways Esau always tries to overcome Jacob: the ways of *neshikah* and *neshikhah*. Sometimes Esau acts directly and openly like a wolf. At other times he is devious and sly – like a fox. At such times the *neshikah* hides the deadly *neshikhah*, and honey drips about the inner poison.

Jacob, knowing of the approaches by Esau, therefore divides his own camp into two, training each of them how

to cope with one of the alternate strategies that Esau might be expected to use. He teaches one camp how to resist Esau's *neshikhah*, his bite or direct physical onslaught. He teaches the other how to oppose the *neshikah* or kiss of Esau, his inviting manner which intends only to throw Jacob off guard.

Therefore, the Kotzker concludes, Jacob prayed to G-d: *hatzileni na mi-yad achi, mi-yad Esav*, save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau. In other words, save me both from Esau when he appears undisguised, as Esau my sworn enemy who aims but to destroy me; and save me from Esau when he appears to me as a brother, in the guise of fraternal affection. Deliver me both from his bite and from his kiss.

In our own days we have suffered grievously from the bite of Esau. One third of our people were the victims of the vicious *neshikhah*. But we have begun to develop the capacity to resist it. From the ghetto resistance fighters to the Hagganah, from the Israel Defense Army to the various efficient agencies combating anti-Semitism in America and abroad, we have learned how to withstand the noxious bite of the Esaus of our day.

The great, overwhelming problem of our day, however, is not the bite. It is the kiss of Esau. Where twenty centuries of Christianity have failed to budge us by sword or by stake, by exile or by persecution, the alternative policy of smiling sweetness, of the *neshikah*, has begun to show the first signs of success. No longer are we threatened with forced conversions. No longer do ex-Jewish priests challenge us to public debates and slander the Talmud as a pack of anti-Christian lies. Now the ex-Jew first praises the Talmud as a very fine book indeed – but one that has been surpassed. Nowadays a missionary to the Jews first writes a book against anti-Semitism. Then he writes a book about “building bridges.” Then he invites us into a “dialogue.” And so on...

Most recently we have witnessed the most incredible, embarrassing kind of situation where Jewish organizations have been competing for the honor of Esau's dubious kisses. It is something we Orthodox Jews must study deliberately and calmly, but that we must not dare overlook or neglect.

The press recently reported that Dr. Nahum Goldman, President of the World Zionist Organization and the World Jewish Congress, had been in contact with a very important Cardinal (a German) to arrange for a single Jewish delegation to attend the forthcoming Ecumenical Council at the Vatican. An Ecumenical Council is a world-wide assembly of high church officials, under the presidency of the Pope, convoked to discuss matters of Catholic Law and Doctrine. At this coming Council the main business will be an understanding with Protestantism and the ultimate merger of all Christian churches.

Reform Rabbis, at least certain prominent ones, have heartily endorsed the plan. In recent years, incidentally, there has been a pronounced tendency on their part to take a positive, affirmative, and even affectionate approach to the founder of Christianity. Reform preaching and writing in this direction has increased noticeably of late.

What should be the reaction of Orthodox Jew? The very first reaction is, I believe, that of speechlessness at the enormous audacity of self-appointed Jewish "leaders" who dare to speak on behalf of all Jewry on matters of such moment to our faith. There is really little that one can say, because there is so much that one should say. Twenty centuries of experience with Esau's bites are to be discarded as Jewish leaders vie for the kiss of the same Esau! They are so flattered by the affectionate attentions of Esau that, in their spiritual sycophancy and religious obsequiousness, they are willing to forget all that Jacob stands for.

But speak we must, for to be silent in the face of such gross insult to the whole Jewish historic experience would be sinful. We must expose the massive folly of this unfortunate move.

First, they have shown a lack of self-respect and have delivered a heavy blow to Jewish dignity by not waiting for an invitation. They have invited themselves, and now stand hat in hand waiting breathlessly for the host's confirmation. A party-crasher is reprehensible whether the party is social or religious, private or international. One has the uncomfortable feeling that much of this has been said with an eye on the headlines, indicating once again how widespread is the poison secreted by the demon

of public-relationism and the press release. Imagine the chagrin and embarrassment that all of us will suffer it, as rumor has already indicated, Rome rebuffs these Jewish leaders because it does not wish to offend the Arabs or the Catholic countries which are anti-Semitic.

Second, this represents an ungracious, distasteful, ignominious intervention in somebody else's religion. What business do Jews have in a Christian religious conference called to discuss Christian fellowship? How dare any Jew presume to tell Christians how to worship or what to believe: Of course, we agree that Christianity is the source of most of anti-Semitism. Some action should be taken to urge liberal Christians to recognize the source of so much human misery and do something constructive about it. But it is never to be done as part of "negotiations," as the Jewish politicians would have it; much less as a result of "dialogue" as the Reform would have it.

Third, who is the President of the World Jewish Congress to speak on behalf of religious Jewry? It is a sad commentary on American Jewry that only here would such a scandalous situation be tolerated, whereby an avowed secularist and political figure arrogates to himself the prerogative of representing one religious community vis-à-vis another: It is true that Dr. Goldman consulted Orthodox leaders – but only after his ill-fated meeting with the German cardinal. This is not consultation. This is a salvage attempt. The difference is that between saving souls and saving face.

Fourth, we must acknowledge soberly and proclaim publicly that, despite all disclaimers, this conjures up the old, dreaded Hebrew word: *shemad!* Of course these Jewish leaders do not want to lead us into mass conversion! But they are the blind and unwitting tools of just that – a campaign of *shemad*. The *shemad* Esau could not achieve by a couple of hundred centuries of biting, he now wants to achieve with a light kiss – assisted by love-starved Jewish leaders!

This is the end result of a secularism which regards Judaism as only a cultural backdrop for a nation or people, and which regards Torah as only a vestige. This is the end result of a Reform which denies the uniqueness of the Jew and reduces our faith to a few well-intentioned liberal phrases in poor imitation of our non-Jewish environs.

And as if these deeds were not enough, one party to all this maneuvering had the ill grace, the temerity, and the spiritual obtuseness to suggest to Catholics that as a gesture to Jews they increase the number of their saints from amongst Old Testament heroes! What an ill-advised,

vulgar, gross meddling with another's religion! And more important: are they so naïve as not to realize that Catholics will ask a price for all this?

Orthodox Jews ask: what is the price we are expected to pay for this kiss of Esau? What, especially, is the price demanded of us by this German cardinal's French assistant who is openly using all this tumult to advance his missionary aims?

What is Judaism that it can be so lightly dealt with? Is it the private domain of a few Reform leaders who can cut, shape, and form, add, subtract, and divide it at will? Is it but a plastic lump of meaningless rituals?

What is Judaism to the Goldman? Is it but another item that can be traded in negotiations at a conference table?

In addition to the usual meaning of Jacob's prayer, and the one given to it by the Kotzker Rebbe, I would interpret it directly: *hatzileni na mi-yad achi!* Almighty G-d, please – help us from the hands of our own Jewish brothers! Our Jewish brethren can prove far more dangerous to us than *mi-yad Esav*. Deliver us from *achi*; then we shall not have to fear Esav.

We must warn these Jewish leaders to desist from their perilous plans lest they jeopardize what precious little unity we do have in American Jewry. We plead with them to remember that the survival of Judaism is more important than a momentary public relations triumph. Remember what the English philosopher George Santayana said: a man ignores the lessons of history at his own peril; he who disregards history is doomed to relive it. And two

Bringing Up Baby

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In this week's parsha we read of Ya'akov's meeting with Eisav after a separation of twenty years. Fearing that Eisav still wishes to kill him, Yaakov makes a series of preparations, sending a generous gift to appease Eisav, praying to God, and preparing for battle if all else fails. At night, he arises from his sleep and moves his family and all of his remaining possessions across the river Yabok. The Torah then tells us that Yaakov remained alone, and that a 'man' wrestled with him until the break of dawn. Rashi, citing the Talmud, says that Ya'akov was alone because he went back for some small jars he had left behind. As the citation continues, from here we learn that the righteous treat their property with care, because (or 'so that') they do not steal. In Netvort to Vayishlach, 5761, we mentioned two different ways of understanding how the Talmud knew

thousand years of Jewish history have proved to us that the main interest of Christians as Christians in Jews as Jews is nothing more or less than: *shemad*, conversion. We plead with both Jewish secularists and Reformers: do not sell us. Do not buy for us new heroes or new prophets. We have enough. Do not be taken in by sweet words and kisses.

We want to live in peace with all our non-Jewish neighbors, even as Jacob was willing to go to all lengths to pacify and appease Esau. But, again like Jacob, we are not willing to sell our souls for it. The price is too high.

Remember what Judaism really is: As David put it, *Torat ha-Shem temimah*, the Torah of the Lord is complete, pure, uncorrupted. It is not a relativistic document that changes in every generation and climate. No one has a warrant to toss it about like a football. No one has the mandate to lay his hands on it – especially if they are spiritually soiled hands. *Torat ha-Shem temimah*.

Almighty G-d! We face critical times. May we be privileged to receive the blessing of Jacob, about whom it is written, after his encounter with Esau, that va-yavo Yaakov shalem ir Shekhem, that Jacob came to Shechem *shalem*, perfect, whole. Our Rabbis explain: *shalem be'gufo, be'mammono, be'torato* – whole physically, financially, and spiritually. May all of Israel attain these perfections. Above all: may all of us, without exception, attain the *shalem be'torato*, religious wholesomeness. For *shalem* must lead to the great, universal, prophetic vision of Shalom.

Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

that Yaakov went back to retrieve the jars he left behind, and the wider implications of one of these explanations. The interested reader is referred to that Netvort. We did not, however, at that time, discuss what exactly these jars were used for, and what was in them, but an exploration of these questions, as we will see, yields some very interesting results.

The Yalkut Reuveni, a compendium of midrashic and kabbalistic sources, writes that the jar that Ya'akov went back for was the one which he used to pour oil from when he dedicated the stone he slept on as a pillar for divine service. After Yaakov poured the oil, it miraculously replenished itself, and was later used to consecrate the mishkan. Later still, the oil in that jar was the oil that the Tsarfatite woman poured out to make a cake for Eliyohu, and which then,

miraculously continually replenished itself and lasted for a year, as recorded in the first book of Melochim, chapter seventeen. Finally, that same jar, according to the Ari, was the one that was found in the Temple the time of the Chashmonaim (Hasmoneans), and provided the oil for the miracle of Chanukah. Interestingly, Rabbeinu Bachya suggests that the jars Yaakov went back for were the baby bottles used to feed the infants as they traveled. He needed to go back for these jars because not having them could lead to a life-endangering situation. This suggestion, on the one hand, is a bit difficult to understand, since the infants could have been nursed. Although one could argue that, on the road, it was easier to feed them from the jars than to nurse them, if it came to a life threatening situation, it is hard to believe that they would not have been nursed. However, I believe that Rabbeinu Bachya's suggestion is very meaningful, but in a different way.

We mentioned the Talmudic comment that Ya'akov's concern over his jars teaches us that the righteous people treat their property with care, because they do not engage in theft. In Yaakov's case, this statement means that he attained all of his possessions through twenty years of hard work that he did for Lavan. Yaakov, in fact, is projected in the Talmud as the ideal example of a conscientious worker, and the Rambam, in describing the faithful way in which Yaakov worked for Lavan, describes him as 'Yaakov the tzaddik.' Rav Zechariah Gelley recently mentioned, in the name of his uncle, Rav Berish, that this is why, according to the midrash, Ya'akov sent a message to Eisav that, while he lived with Lavan, he observed the six hundred thirteen commandments. What he meant to say was that all of the possessions that he now had were obtained through faithful work done in accordance with all the regulations of the Torah. It was with jars obtained through this kind of effort that Yaakov provided food for his children, in order to raise them, from infancy, in strict accordance with the Torah. The Talmud in Bava Metzia tells us that Rav Chiya taught children in a way that would assure its perpetuation. He first slaughtered deer, then made parchment from

their hides, then wrote Torah scrolls from which he taught the children. The idea behind this involvement in the preparatory stages of teaching Torah is that it is important to assure that the study is done in purity, from the earliest, preliminary stages. The Vilna Gaon, in fact, is reported to have said that if someone would build a synagogue in a manner that every last nail was procured through pure means, according to halacha, that synagogue would never be destroyed. According to Rav Ovadiah Seforno, that is why the mishkan, built in purity by Moshe and then Bezalel, was never destroyed, but only buried. Yaakov, too, raised his children in this way, and that is why the baby bottles he used were so dear to him.

Rabbi Yissochor Frand, in a taped shiur on parshas Vayeitzei, mentions that Rabbi Leib Gurwicz, who was Rosh Yeshiva in Gateshead Yeshiva once visited the British Museum, and saw cow horns that were used in ancient times as baby bottles. Rabbi Gurwicz explained, based on this fact, the command issued by the Syrian Greeks to the Jews in the time of the Chashmonaim, that they should write on the horn of an ox that they have no portion with the God of Israel. The horn of an ox, said Rabbi Gurwicz, was a reference to the baby bottles, and, in a broader sense, the decree meant that the Jews were ordered to change the way they raised their children from infancy. Perhaps, then, following Rabbeinu Bachya, and combining his remarks with those of the Yalkut Reuveni and the Ari in regard to the contents of the jars Yaakov went back to salvage, we can suggest that the jars were baby bottles consisting of cows' horns, and it was the same form of purity and dedication exhibited in Yaakov's use of those jugs for his children, in complete conformity with halacha, that was followed in the future dedication of the mishkan, the work of Eliyohu on behalf of the Tsarfatite woman, and the rededication of the Beis HaMikdash in the time of the Chashmonaim. In all of these instances, care was taken to assure, that, from the very beginning, the acts of building sanctuaries and homes were done in complete purity, in order to assure their perpetuation.

Take My Blessing

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally entitled "Parsha Bytes - Vayishlach 5779" and presented at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on November 22, 2018)

In this week's Parsha, when Yaakov finally meets Eisav, he first prepares by sending Eisav a tremendous gift—large flocks of various animals—called mincha, as the pasuk says: *Va-ya'avov ha-mincha al panav*. And Eisav

responds: *Yesh li rav, achi, yehi lecha asher lach*. I have plenty—I don't need any gift from you. And Yaakov replies to him: *Ve-lakachta minchasi miyadi... Kach na es birchasi asher huvas lach, ki chanani Elokim, ve-chi yesh li chol*,

va-yiftzar bo va-yikach. He says: Take this mincha. Take my brachah, sent to you because Hashem graced me and I have everything I need. And Eisav finally agreed.

All the meforshim are bothered by why this offering is called a brachah. This is really just a mincha, a gift intended to honor someone—particularly, to honor a superior. So Yaakov was just honoring Eisav. But why does he suddenly call it a brachah? It's not a blessing; it's a gift. So Rashi says here: Brachah doesn't have to mean blessing. Since you can greet someone with a brachah it could mean a greeting. So this is just a greeting between us, not a mincha. Please, kindly take my greeting. And this is the way people greet in some cultures. You bring people gifts, and you greet them. Ramban, though, has a more philosophical approach. He says: A gift is called a brachah because you give from that which Hashem has blessed you with. Yaakov is saying: Take the brachah Hashem gave me. This fits well with the next words in the pasuk: *Ki chanani Elokim, ve-chi yesh li chol, va-yiftzar bo va-yikach*. What does Eisav say back to Yaakov? *Achi, yehi lecha asher lach*—what's yours should be yours. It's your hard-earned money. There's a hashkafa that whoever earned the money should keep it—*yihy lecha asher lach*. The problem is that Chazal say in one opinion in Pirkei Avos that this might be Midas Sedom. It's not really your hard-earned money. We all must do our hishtadlus—*yegias kapecha ki tochal, ashrecha ve-tov lach*. From a moral, spiritual, and religious perspective, someone who works hard and makes money is much better off and is on a tremendous spiritual madreiga. But from an objective perspective, your hard work didn't get you the money. Hashem gave you the money. Everything is from Hashem! And Yaakov answers Eisav's concern philosophically. Eisav says: *Yehi lach asher lach*—what's yours is yours. You deserve it because you worked hard. You should keep what you worked hard for, and I should keep what I worked hard for. Yaakov says: *Kach na es birchasi ... ki chanani Elokim*. It is a *matnas chinam*. I didn't earn this for myself. Hashem graced me. And therefore, of course, I should share it with others! I'll give some of it to tzedakah, and some to help make shalom and fix my bad relationships. I'll use it for

all kinds of good, and there's no point keeping it all for myself—because it's not really mine anyway. Hashem gave it to me to share, not to keep for myself. And this is what Rav Elazar Ish Bartosah says in Pirkei Avos—*Tein Lo mi-Shelo, she-ata ve-shelcha Shelo*. If you think you deserve all the money you have, you're going to keep it all for yourself. Rather, *tein Lo mi-Shelo*. Realize that it's not your money—it's Hashem's money. Yaakov says: Don't worry about my hard-earned money. It's not my money—it's a brachah of Hashem. Therefore, I share it with everyone, and help make the world the kind of world that it should be. So I think this is classic Yaakov vs. Eisav—their hashkafas as to where money comes from. And as Bnei Yaakov, we obviously should follow in Yaakov's derech and remember that everything we have is a brachah from Hashem. I don't deserve anything more than anyone else. Perhaps I deserve zechuyos for my mitzvos, but I don't deserve money more than anyone else. So I must figure out how to spend as much of it as possible doing the Ratzon Hashem—not on myself. And that, I think, is Ramban's lesson here.

I'll just throw in as an aside that there could be a third pshat of why Yaakov chose the word brachah here, from a totally different perspective. Obviously, it harks back to Parshas Toldos. Why is Eisav mad at Yaakov? Because he stole the brachah from him. But what happened to Yaakov in the last passage? He got the brachah from the malach without any tricks or shtiklach, just by standing up for himself with koach and gevura and wrestling the angel. And the malach gave him a brachah, fair and square. Maybe Yaakov is also hinting to Eisav here: You know what? Take back your brachah. I got the first brachah as Yaakov, when I was okeiv. And now I got a brachah as Yisrael, openly—I was *sarisa im Elokim ve-im anashim, va-tuchal*. You can have that brachah. I have a better brachah now. The new Yaakov, transformed into Yisrael, is ready to abandon the brachah acquired via trickery and deceit, and accomplish everything he needs to accomplish with straightness and courage. Shabbat Shalom.

Ramban on Our Parshah: Rivkah's Final Sacrifice

Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

We know about the burial of three of the matriarchs; Avraham buried Sarah in Me'arat haMachpelah, Yaakov buried Rachel on the way to Efrat, and Yaakov buried Leah in Me'arat

haMachpelah. But what happened to Rivkah?

A midrash reports that her death and burial took place in our parshah. Yaakov built a mizbeiach in Beit El. Then the Torah informs us that Devorah, Rivkah's nursemaid, passed

away, and Yaakov buried her in Beit El and named the site for his tearful grief. Then Hashem appeared to Yaakov and blessed him. (Bereishit 35:1-9) According to Bereishit Rabbah (81:5), Yaakov received word of his mother's passing after he buried Devorah, and he named the site for his tears for Rivkah. The berachah Hashem brought to Yaakov was one of consolation.

But then why didn't the text report Rivkah's death and burial explicitly? Ramban offers two explanations:

- A midrash contends that Rivkah's household concealed her death, to prevent Esav from finding out and coming home for the funeral. With Avraham deceased, Yitzchak homebound because of his vision and Yaakov gone, Esav would be at the head of the procession, and people would condemn Rivkah for producing such a child. (Tanchuma, Ki Tetze 4)
- Ramban himself suggests that the death was not concealed by her household. Esav did not come home for the funeral; he reviled Rivkah for what she did to him. Instead, Rivkah was buried by the

Hittites, and the text hid this from the reader to preserve Rivkah's dignity. [Indeed, every burial in the book of Bereishit lists who performed the burial, and here the Hittites would have been credited.]

Ramban's second answer resonates. Rivkah was chosen to marry Yitzchak, rather than have him marry a Canaanite, and the Hittites were Canaanites. Rivkah told Yitzchak that she didn't want Yaakov to marry a Hittite. Esav married Hittites, and they embittered her. (Bereishit 26:34-35) For Rivkah to be buried by Hittites would be ignominious.

Why did Rivkah suffer this fate? Perhaps because of this: When Yaakov was worried about being caught deceiving his father, Rivkah pledged, "Your curse is upon me." Now the curse came to fruition. Because Rivkah swapped Yaakov for Esav, Esav hated her and Yaakov needed to flee. So when Rivkah passed away, there was no one other than the Hittite neighbors to look after her.

Rivkah's end, as depicted by Ramban, was tragic, but it was also heroic. She paid a price for her success, but she safeguarded the mission of Avraham and Sarah, ensuring it would continue in righteousness.

Rav Soloveitchik on Vayishlach: A Model Penitent

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

Following the death of Leah, her eldest son Reuven seems to commit a disturbing act: "It was when Yisrael was living in that land that Reuven went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine. Yisrael heard, and Yaakov's sons were twelve" (Genesis 35:22). Could Reuven have truly done something so despicable?

According to Rashi, Reuven did not literally do this:

When Rachel died, Yaakov took his bed which had always been placed in Rachel's tent and no others and placed it in Bilhah's tent. Reuven came and resented the insult to his mother and said, "If my mother was subordinate to her sister [Rachel], must she also be subordinate to her handmaid [Bilhah]?" Therefore, he mixed up [the bed.]¹

Reuven moved his father's bed to Leah's tent to express indignation at his father Yaakov's treatment of her.

Unintended Consequences

Although less offensive than what the literal words say, Reuven's act is still reprehensible. In the verse quoted above, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik notes that the third Patriarch is twice called Yisrael, and then once Yaakov.

Since the name Yisrael represents the free and powerful Jew, and Yaakov the subservient Jew, the verse appears to suggest that Reuven's brazen conduct brought about a terrible change. Prior to Reuven's act, our forefather was a man who commanded the honor he deserved; afterwards, he was reduced to a shell of his former dignified self. "Reuven's actions altered a historical trajectory that was to be victorious, as represented by the name Yisrael, to one of servitude and dependence, as represented by the name Yaakov."²

With Yaakov's authority in his own household undermined by his firstborn, the Rav argues that the rest of the brothers could run riot. Without a strong father figure to respect, they could entertain the unthinkable notion of killing their own brother and actually sell him into slavery.³ This can explain why Reuven was not present during the sale of Yosef. The Midrash says that "he was busy with his sackcloth and fasting for mixing up his father's bed."⁴ When he discovered that his brothers had murder on their minds, he realized now that his disrespectful conduct had a domino effect.

Dishonor for Dishonor?

Reuven's act of dishonor brought dishonor upon himself. As the firstborn, both kingship and the priesthood would have been rightfully his. Yaakov could now see that Reuven was not suited for either and characterized him as being "like water" (Genesis 49:4), which as a free-flowing liquid is very unstable. Reuven behaved impulsively and without counsel, when a leader must act calmly, deliberately, and wisely under pressure. The Rav suggests that being "busy with his sackcloth and fasting" at the critical moment of Yosef's sale was a mistake. Someone made of leadership material would have been present and protected Yosef.⁵

Despite this huge demotion, Reuven never loses his place within the family. The very verse which describes his transgression concludes with the phrase "and Yaakov's sons were twelve" (Genesis 35:22). Although Yaakov knows what Reuven has done, he does not banish or disinherit him. To the contrary, Reuven continues to be listed first among his brothers, as emphasized by the very next verse: "The sons of Leah, the firstborn of Yaakov, Reuven" (Genesis 35:23).⁶ Reuven's standing is reaffirmed at the time of Yaakov's death. Not only does he receive the first blessing, but after the final blessing the Torah emphasizes that "all these are the tribes of Israel, twelve" and that each was blessed according to his appropriate blessing (Genesis 49:28).

At the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, when Moshe offers his final blessings to each tribe, he addresses the tribe of Reuven with a striking expression: "May Reuven live and not die, and may his people be numbered" (Deuteronomy 33:6). This curious blessing seems to indicate that Reuven's legacy was still in question. The Midrash says that this was because of the long shadow cast by the "episode of Bilhah" centuries earlier. Moshe affirms that Reuven is part of the Children of Israel like the rest of the tribes.⁷

A Model Penitent

Considering the serious nature and repercussions of Reuven's transgression, why wasn't he cast out of Yaakov's household or his tribe stigmatized? Rabbi Moshe Wolfson, mashgiach ruchani of Mesivta Torah Vodaas, cites a Midrash:

The Holy One said to [Reuven], "No one has ever sinned before Me and repented, and you are first to repent. On your life, one of your descendants will be first to repent. And who was that? Hoshea, as it is written, "Return, Yisrael, unto Hashem your God [for you have stumbled in your iniquity]" (Hosea 14:2).⁸

God rewarded Reuven for his quick penitence by placing the prophecy of repentance on the lips of his descendant Hoshea. His prophecy was chosen as the haftarah read on Shabbat Shuvah, the last Shabbat before Yom Kippur, at the height of the penitential season.

Rabbi Wolfson further quotes the Peri Tzadik of Rebbe Tzadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Lublin, who says that the Torah publicizes Reuven's sin only because he is a role model for all who seek to repent. He sought to right his own wrongs, to contain the damage wrought by his own rash doings. Reuven opposed the fraternal cabal, and though he failed to protect Yosef in the event, he did make an effort. The Torah tells us that "he returned" (וָשׁוּב) to the pit and then "he returned" (וָשׁוּב) to his brothers (Genesis 37:29-30), the repeated word being from the same root as repentance (תְּשׁוּבָה). Apparently, the Sages saw in this repetition an intimation of Reuven's true legacy—his efforts to repair relationships and make amends.⁹

Exploring the Rav's Insight

Unfortunately, Reuven's miscalculations and failures had a detrimental effect on his own life and personal destiny. The Rav shows that, tragically, he lost all three coveted positions that were within his reach: priesthood, kingship and firstborn rights. He had to live with the ramifications of his mistakes. However, Reuven also possessed remarkable resilience. His sincere intentions and impressive determination to correct his faults had a purifying effect not only on his life but on his future generations. The Torah details his failings, but it also beautifully spotlights his redeeming qualities.

Rabbi Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik, the Rav's namesake and great-grandfather, writes that what set Reuven's repentance apart was his recognition that from a single sin a long, unforeseeable causal chain unfolds. Reuven's descendant Hoshea imparted this precise message. In Rabbi Soloveitchik's reading, Hoshea says "Return, Yisrael" from your present sins, "for you have stumbled in your iniquity" far beyond your original misstep.¹⁰ Having established this understanding, we will always look up to the oldest brother, the tribe of Reuven, "the first to repent," in seeking to properly right past wrongs. The eldest of the tribes of Israel will forever be a paradigm for perseverance and for what the Midrash attests was his most magnificent accomplishment, complete and thorough repentance.

[1] Rashi on Genesis 35:22.

[2] Chumash Mesoras Harav, 1:265.

[3] Even according to the commentaries that claim that the brothers had convened a court and found Yosef guilty and deserving of capital punishment, the brothers were guilty of not conferring with their father and turning to their elder for guidance and direction. See Schachter, *Mi-Peninei ha-Rav*, 358–359.

[4] Genesis Rabbah, 84:19 cited by Rashi on Genesis 37:29.

[5] Chumash Mesoras Harav, 1:358.

[6] Ramban on Genesis 35:22-23 and Seforno on Genesis 35:23, s.v. בכור יעקב ראובן.

[7] Rashi on Deuteronomy 33:6, quoting Sifrei, 347.

[8] Genesis Rabbah, 84:19.

[9] Tziyon ve-Areha, 21–22.

[10] Beit ha-Levi, Vayeshev, s.v. וישב ראובן אל הבור.

Redeeming Distress

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

After twenty-two years of estrangement, Jacob is cautiously set to reunite with his brother, Esau. Their previous interaction culminated with Jacob fleeing to avoid Esau's potentially deathly wrath. Jacob's messengers return with news that Esau and his four hundred men were approaching. The Biblical text, which does not often provide vivid emotional depictions of the inner lives of its characters, informs us that Jacob was “greatly afraid - *va'yira Yaakov me'od* - and distressed, *va'yeitzer lo*” (Gen. 32:8).

Commentaries are bothered by two puzzling elements of Jacob's emotional reaction. First, God had previously appeared to Jacob, promising him that God would protect him (Gen. 28:15). How could Jacob be afraid if he had a divine guarantee of safety? Second, what is the difference between the seeming redundant descriptions of being “greatly afraid” and “distressed”?

Rabbi Eliav HaKohen, a medieval Tosafist scholar, uses the first question to answer the second. He suggests that the reason Jacob was “distressed” was precisely because he was “greatly afraid.” He was disappointed in himself that he was scared despite God's promise of his safety.

Abarbanel, a 15th century Portuguese scholar, however, reflecting the influence of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, justifies Jacob's fear. He defines courage not as acting in the absence of fear, but rather acting rationally despite fear. It was the biologically natural response for Jacob to experience fear in that moment, yet he made the moral and spiritual choice to overcome that fear and act courageously. Abarbanel's approach is encapsulated by Professor Nehama Leibowitz when she writes that “only after overcoming his fears and faintheartedness does the real hero and believer in God emerge” (*New Studies in Bereishit*, p. 355).

While Abarbanel's formulation redeems Jacob's ultimate behavior from criticism, it still portrays the original fear in an unfavorable light. The emotion needed to be conquered by reason. While there are certainly cases where emotions can become disordered and dysfunctional, however, most

of the time, negative emotions serve a functional purpose. Culling from research, Dr. Will Meek identifies several potential benefits of anxiety, including how it can motivate us to act, drive us to be better prepared, focus our attention on important goals and values, and serve to protect us from dangerous situations.

Returning to Jacob, perhaps, unlike Abarbanel's reading, the fear itself was a healthy, functional, and adaptive response, which helped motivate, prepare, focus, and protect him from the threat. A rereading of the original verse may support such an approach. The Hebrew word “*vayeitzer*,” which we translated as “distressed” is understood by Rabbeinu Ephraim, another medieval Tosafist scholar, as “narrow,” from the root “*tzar*.” If this is the case, the verse is not describing two emotions of “greatly afraid” and “distressed,” but rather the functional impact of the negative emotion. “Jacob was greatly afraid, narrowing his focus” to the challenge at hand. He subsequently takes proactive and protective actions. He prepares for the worst-case scenario, splitting his family into two camps to allow one to flee if necessary. Jacob then prays to God for protection and prepares gifts to present to Esau as a diplomatic tactic. Jacob isn't acting effectively despite his fear, but because of his fear.

Negative emotions do not always need to be overcome. They can be functional, beneficial, and redemptive. No doubt, we have all been experiencing our share of negative emotions regarding the war in Israel. Whether fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, or grief, these negative emotions can motivate us to act, to be prepared, and to protect ourselves. They can also help us focus us on important values, driving us to do good deeds, uniting us as a people, and connecting us to God and loved ones. We would do well to take Jacob's lead, and not be afraid of fear but utilize fear to propel us to triumph.

Israel, Version 3.0

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Being part of the “third” generation is difficult. The first generation innovates. The second generation consolidates. The third generation often squanders the achievements of the previous two. It is never easy being third.

A well-known study discovered that financial wealth is generally squandered by the third generation. Through hard work and entrepreneurship, the first generation accumulates wealth. Appreciative of these efforts, the second generation preserves wealth. By contrast, the third generation, taking its privileges for granted, squanders wealth. The curse of the third generation.

Sefer Bereishit showcases the religious challenges of the third generation. Avraham was a revolutionary who introduced bold new ideas to the human imagination. He discovered a one G-d who was responsible for the diversity and dichotomy of our vast world. Additionally, by discovering that Hashem was compassionate, Avraham transformed religious thinking. His life was dramatic, and his impact was astonishing.

His son Yitzchak was tasked with locking in these revolutionary ideas and translating them into daily life. In contrast to his father, his life was unremarkable. While Avraham was a nomadic preacher, traveling from location to location, Yitzchak was a sedentary farmer who never traveled beyond the boundaries of Israel. Living a humdrum life without any wars and without visitations from angels, he formed a homestead, excavated deep wells, and cemented his father’s revolutionary ideas. Living through the first and second generation is straightforward and uncomplicated.

Steering the third generation, Ya’akov is challenged to protect these ideas and to sustain historical and religious thrust. Often, the third generation loses its momentum and the revolution grinds to a halt. Taking ideas and success for granted, the third generation often descends into petty rivalries and personal animosities. Far removed from the energy and idealism of the founding generation, the third generation can easily sink into apathy and aimlessness. Though his family is threatened by power struggles and personality conflicts, Ya’akov heroically battles to preserve both family unity and Jewish destiny. He does not allow the third generation to deteriorate into dysfunction.

As the popular saying goes “hard times create strong men, strong men create good times, good times create weak men, and weak men create hard times”. As the third

generation inherits good times, they can easily become weak men. Ya’akov works hard to keep make his children “strong men” so that they can continue to build history.

Fallen Kings

Throughout Jewish history, monarchs of the third generation were haunted by this curse. Jewish monarchy was launched through the exciting and dramatic rise of Dovid Hamelech. His son, Shlomo Hamelech institutionalized his father’s gains by constructing a Mikdash and by globalizing Jewish influence. However, by the third generation our unity began to fray, as our state was split into two warring factions under the reign of Shlomo’s son, Rechavam. Our people were badly divided into two hostile kingdoms, a split from which we never recovered.

Hundreds of years later, Jewish monarchy, once again, faced the curse of the third generation. In the second Temple era, during the Chanukah miracles, heroic Hasmonean warriors defied mighty Greek armies, while valiantly defending Jewish sovereignty against all odds. We don’t know much about the second Hasmonean generation, but the third generation was badly flawed. The Hasmonean successor, John Hyrcanus defected to the Tzedukim faction and adopted policies which incited national discord. His successor, Alexander Jannus, launched a bloody civil war and executed scores of Tana’im. The curse of the third generation struck again.

The Third generation of Israel

We are the third generation of the modern state of Israel. The first generation of pioneers fought numerous wars to reassert our rights to our national homeland. The first round of wars defended our basic rights to a homeland, while the second wave of wars solidified our borders and returned us to the Biblical territories of Israel, including Yerushalayim.

The second generation of Israel achieved financial stability and, subsequently, built an economic superpower. In addition, the second generation advanced worldwide aliyah, beckoning Jews to return to the land of history, which had now started to flow with milk, honey, and with economic prospects. Finally, the second generation began the arduous process of forging peaceful relations with those Arab neighbors willing to embrace our presence in our rightful homeland.

Many doubted whether the third generation of Israel could sustain the idealism of the first two generations. The current “Tik Tok” generation was born into a prosperous country, and they didn’t face existential struggles. How would this generation respond to adversity? Would they have display selflessness and dedication to Jewish history? Were they too comfortable for patriotic spirit and too addicted to screens to care about long-term ideals? Would Israel suffer the curse of the third generation?

Though we faced a horrific tragedy, the current war has debunked most of these worries. Evidently, the third generation of Israel is more than capable of driving Jewish destiny.

So many people questioned whether this new generation would sacrifice personal comfort for national needs or for historical mission. Our enthusiastic response to the war effort has allayed these worries. The 150% enlistment rates of reserve soldiers and the images of Israeli travelers streaming home to join the war, signal that the spirit of sacrifice still beats loud in Israeli hearts. We are first encountering the countless stories of “first responders”, soldiers, policemen, and average citizens who initially and heroically fought off the assault hundreds of terrorists preventing them from invading the heart of Israel and causing even greater casualties. Despite the false narratives which our enemies ceaselessly parrot, this third generation possesses moral and historical clarity. Our war is not a struggle between colonialists and suppressed indigenous populations. This is an existential battle over our homeland and a just war to eradicate murderers and barbarians. The third generation is prepared to sacrifice for the larger arc of Jewish history.

“Fulfilling” Torah Prohibitions

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

As Yaakov made his way back to Eretz Yisrael after spending twenty years in Charan with his uncle, Lavan, he delivered a message of reconciliation to his brother, Eisav. He began this message by saying: עם לבן גרתי, ואחר עד עתה – *“I have dwelled with Lavan, and I have been delayed until now”* (32:5).

Rashi, in one of the most famous passages in his Torah commentary, notes that the word גרתי (“I have dwelled”) in gematria equals 613 – תריג – and thus alludes to the 613 mitzvos of the Torah. Yaakov was saying to Eisav, in Rashi’s words, עם לבן הרשע גרתי, ותריג מצוות שמרתי, ולא למדתי ממעשיו הרעים – *“I dwelled with Lavan, the evil man, and [yet] I observed the 613 mitzvos, and I did not learn from his*

So many wondered whether this generation could preserve national unity. During the awful past year of public discontent our social fabric was gradually torn apart. One by one the clasps which held our people together began to break. One by one we abandoned the unifying narratives which had united us. Jews accusing other Jews of being “Nazis” signaled that the Holocaust was no longer a unifying narrative. Hopefully, after facing real modern-day Nazis, no Jew will ever, ever, hurl that term at another Jew. After Oct 7., that behavior is unthinkable.

Similarly, the scene of Yom Kippur prayers in Tel Aviv being rudely interrupted for political motives signaled that the Yom Kippur experience was no longer a unifying narrative for both secular and religious.

As our fabric began to rupture, we feared that we had lost all unity and togetherness. This war has demonstrated that, deep down, our unity still runs strong. Our mass volunteerism, and our support for the victims, the hostages and our soldiers has reassured us that what unites us is far greater than what divides us.

Finally, we wondered whether a secularized society had abandoned religious interest. Could secular and religious Israel still coexist side by side? This war has awakened Jewish spirit. For some that spirit is religious, for others it is traditional and for others it is historical. Either way, the resurgence of Jewish spirit is overwhelming, and it isn’t limited to Israelis. Across the world, Jews, facing venomous antisemitism are looking back to our shared past and our national spirit to fend off the so called “enlightened world”.

The third generation of Israel is doing just fine.

evil ways.”

The Rachmastrivka Rebbe, in Amaros Tehoros, cites the Or Yitzchak who draws our attention to the word שמרתי used by Rashi in this comment. As we know, the 613 mitzvos consist of two basic groups of commands – mitzvos asei and mitzvos lo ta’asei. There are obligations and restrictions; things that we required to do, and things which we are required to refrain from doing. We might wonder, at first glance, how Yaakov could say, ותריג מצוות שמרתי – that he fulfilled all 613 mitzvos. How does one “fulfill,” for example, the prohibition against eating non-kosher food? The mitzvos lo ta’asei, the prohibitions of the Torah, are, seemingly, not commands that we fulfill,

that we actively observe, but rather restrictions by which we abide. We do not perform these mitzvos, but rather refrain from forbidden activities so that we do not violate them. What, then, does Rashi mean when he writes that Yaakov said about himself, *ג' מצוות שמרתי*? Imagine a man telling his wife, "Look how good a husband I am – I haven't beaten you up once in all our years together!!" Is his refraining from hurting his wife an expression of his love, commitment and sacrifice?

The Or Yitzchak answers that we "fulfill" the mitzvos lo ta'aseh by restraining our impulses and desires. When we feel a drive or instinct to violate a Torah law, and we then muster the self-discipline and self-control to restrain ourselves, in subservience to Hashem's authority, we are credited with the observance of a mitzva. Indeed, we actively observe all the Torah's commands, both the mitzvos asei and the mitzvos lo ta'aseh, as observance of

Sacred & Profane

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In Parshas Vayishlach, Yaakov Avinu travels back to the land of Canaan, after working for Lavan for twenty years. Fourteen years of servitude were for his wives, and six more years for his flocks. En route home, he fears the wrath of his brother Eisav who had sworn to kill Yaakov (Bereishis 27:41).

To prepare for this historic confrontation, Yaakov divides his family into two camps, so that if one were to be decimated by Eisav, the other would survive (Bereishis 32:8-9). He prays to Hashem for Divine salvation and deliverance from the hand of his brother, Eisav (32:10-13). And he sends many gifts of appeasement to Eisav, in the form of hundreds of animals (32:14-20).

In regard to the sending of the gifts, the pasuk says: *וַיִּקַּח מִן הַבָּא בְיָדוֹ מִנְחָה לְעֵשָׂו אָחִיו, and he took from that which he had in his hand as a gift for his brother, Eisav (32:14)*. Rashi, quoting the Medrash, teaches: what were the gifts he had in his hand that he sent to Eisav? *שְׂאֵדָם צָר, אֲבָנִים טוֹבוֹת וּמְרַגְלִיּוֹת, שְׂאֵדָם צָר - precious stones and jewels which a person binds in a packet and carries in his hand*.

Why does the pasuk make a point of telling us *מִן הַבָּא בְיָדוֹ*, that the gifts were those things 'he had in his hand'? Whether the verse is referring to animals or precious gems, why does the Torah emphasize these were matters he had in his hand?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt'l, the Rav, teaches, "And he took from that which he had in his hand a gift from his

the Torah's prohibitions often requires us to work to hold ourselves back and to overcome our natural instincts and tendencies.

The Rachmastrivka Rebbe explains that this is the meaning of Rashi's comment, *ג' מצוות שמרתי*. Nobody embodied the yetzer ha'ra more powerfully than Lavan. The man whom Yaakov lived with and worked for was a corrupt, immoral idol-worshipper. Yaakov was exposed to negative influences and pressures on a regular basis for twenty years. He could thus truly say, *ג' מצוות שמרתי* – that he "performed" all the mitzvos, even the mitzvos lo ta'asei. Each and every day for those twenty years, Yaakov resisted the influence and pressure exerted by his immoral uncle, and adhered to the Torah's laws and principles. And in so doing, he actively fulfilled all the mitzvos.

brother Eisav.' When Yaakov wanted to impress Eisav, he sent him everything he had: jewels, he-goats, she-goats, ewes and rams, bucks, camels, kine (cows collectively) and bulls.

"The Jew is willing to give away all his possessions to avoid an edict or an expulsion, to free the head of the community from prison, and such like. But as our Sages have wisely noted, 'that which he had in his hand' refers to profane things, not sacred ones. All the gifts, all the sacrifices, all the tributes which the Jew brought to the lords of Eisav during that long night, consisted of profane objects: everyday possessions, goats and sheep, precious stones, political rights. As long as Eisav received only *מִן הַבָּא בְיָדוֹ*, goods which can be bought and sold, Israel (Yaakov) exhibited submissiveness and inferiority.

"But when Eisav wanted a gift of Yaakov's sacred objects - the holiness of family life, Shabbos, kashrus, beliefs and traditions; when Eisav demanded that Yaakov compromise his Torah way of life - a remarkable transformation occurred within Yaakov. Suddenly, the quiet, unassuming Jew became a hero, full of strength and stubbornness. The crooked back straightened, the pitiful eyes began to spit fire, and Yaakov refused Eisav's request with chutzpah and determination... Yaakov told those who represent him in that dark Diaspora night, in the kingly palaces of Germany, Poland, and Russia: Eisav will begin to debate with you, to ask you about your beliefs, hopes, and ideals. He will

propose, 'let us take our journey together' (Gen.33:12). He will suggest that his religion and Judaism can easily merge, that all can live peacefully. Tell him that we can cooperate, as long as we are dealing with profane matters, with business, with politics, with science, with goats, camels and mules, with precious stones and pearls. If he wants a gift of 'that which he had in hand,' he can have it; 'it is a gift sent to my master, to Eisav' (v.19).

"But the moment he demands more and begins to ask for souls, for the purity of my family, my Shabbos, my G-d, you must give a different response... You should answer sharply and with pride [32:19]. I myself, my soul, my heart, my feelings, my hopes, and my beliefs belong not to you, but to Judaism. This is what Yaakov announced throughout the generations to all his representatives and politicians. And when Eisav persisted and demanded things that were sacred, then the passive man, the coward, the man who said three times a day 'and to those that curse me let my soul be silent, let my soul be unto all as the dust,' became a fighter who resisted Eisav with great stubbornness" (*Chumash Masores HaRav, Bereishis*, p.243-245).

Amichai Shindler of Kibbutz Kerem Shalom miraculously survived the October 7th massacre but was left with severe injuries. Kerem Shalom is a mixed religious-secular kibbutz that is less than 100 meters [.06 miles] from the Gaza Strip. That Shabbos/Simchas Torah morning, Amichai, 33, and his wife and six children went into their safe room when they heard rocket sirens blare early in the morning. When they heard the sound of terrorists shouting in Arabic inside their home. Amichai ran to the door and held it shut, while his wife and small children huddled inside. Amichai held the door shut for hours, fending off the terrorists but eventually, the Hamas animals threw an explosive device at it. The resulting blast seriously injured Amichai, blowing off one of his forearms,

Who Was Esau?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Vayishlach, the dramatic encounter between Jacob and Esau, reaches a crescendo. Jacob has been away from home for 36 years (according to the Midrash), and he and his large family are finally returning to Canaan to meet or to confront his brother Esau who had threatened to kill Jacob because of the stolen birthright and blessings. Jacob does not know whether Esau has forgiven him or will attack him, so he prepares for all eventualities—tribute, prayer, and battle.

breaking his other arm, and crushing his face and jaw. Amichai fell to the floor of the room – still conscious but bleeding profusely. He lay there for three and a half hours until IDF soldiers reached the kibbutz and evacuated Amichai to the hospital. His wife and children were physically unharmed.

Amichai is now undergoing rehabilitation at Sheba Hospital, learning to live with his severe injuries, with one arm cut off right below the elbow and the other severely injured. One of his first requests after regaining consciousness was to meet with Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein shlita. Once Amichai was in rehabilitation, he had two more requests – to meet the Gerrer Rebbe, HaGaon HaRav Shaul Altar, whose Torah he's enjoyed in recent years, and to start using Rabbeinu Tam Tefillin. HaRav Altar went to visit Amichai last week and told him "ידיי אמונה" (Shemos 17:12) – you can learn emunah from your hands."

They also spoke about tying tefillin and how Amichai will light Chanukah candles – Amichai related that he asked the physical therapists to practice lighting candles with him. The Rebbe was moved, saying that it's a "מצוה לפרסם" that these are the requests of a Jew in such a situation.

Regarding Amichai's injuries, the Rosh Yeshivah said: "It's not an individual tza'ar – it's a tza'ar of all of Klal Yisrael. But we know that Hakadosh Baruch Hu is in charge." <https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/israel-news/2241882/a-jews-request-after-arm-blown-off-rabbeinu-tam-tefillin.html>

When Eisav wants chattel, that which one 'holds in his hands,' he can have it and to save a life the Jew will freely part with such goods. But when he wants the emunah that defines us, Shabbos, kashrus, masorah, kedusha, the same Jew becomes a courageous warrior who will never concede defeat. "ידיי אמונה" (Shemos 17:12) – you can learn emunah from your hands."

Esau, of course, plays a prominent role in this parasha, not only in the confrontation scene with Jacob, but unexpectedly, we find that the entire final chapter of the parasha, Genesis 36, records a lengthy chronicle of Esau and his family. The opening verse in Genesis 36 reads: וְאֵלֶּה תִּלְדוֹת וְאֵשָׁר, These are the descendants of Esau, he is Edom.

Why does the Torah dwell on Esau and his children at this point in the parasha? As long as there was a relationship between Jacob and Esau, we needed to know

about Esau. But now that Isaac has died (Genesis 35:29), the relationship between the brothers has ceased. They have already distanced themselves from each other in their lifestyles and their dwelling places. It's not that they move to nearby neighborhoods, or even to different cities within the same land. Esau leaves the land of Canaan entirely and goes to live in Mt. Seir (Genesis 36:6-8), while Jacob remains in Canaan.

So why does the Torah stop the story of Jacob and his sons at this point and devote an entire chapter to Esau? After all, it could have just noted that Esau had left the land, and that the relationship between the brothers has ended. That would have surely been sufficient.

The Midrash Tanchumah, Vayeishev, 1, asks this very question in a rather caustic fashion. Asks the Tanchumah: Why did scripture have to write their [Esau's] family relationships? וְכִי לֹא הָיָה לוֹ לְהַקְדֹּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מֵה שְׂיִכְתָּב? Didn't the Al-mighty have anything else to write?!

This is not the first time that the Torah interrupts a narrative and provides a seemingly unnecessary genealogy. In parashat Noach, Genesis 10, the Torah provides the detailed origins of the nations for a second time. Again, at the end of parashat Chayei Sara (Genesis 25:12-18) the genealogy of Ishmael is listed. And, of course, at the very end of our parasha, the chronicles of Esau are recorded.

There seems to be a pattern to these interruptions. In all three instances, scripture quickly disposes of the chronicles of the characters that are no longer part of the main story, and continues immediately with a far more important issue. After the origins of the nations are listed in Genesis 10, the origins of Abraham follow, in Genesis 11. After the progeny of Ishmael are listed in Genesis 25, we learn in the very next parasha about the children of Isaac, (Genesis 25:19-27). And following on the heels of the descendants of Esau listed in Genesis 36, we learn of the chronicles of Joseph and his brethren (Genesis 37).

Perhaps there is a more significant reason for the detailed information concerning Esau's family than simply serving as a literary device building tension for the dramatic story of Joseph that follows. Perhaps the detailed excursion into Esau's family is justified because the descendants of Esau play a critical role in Jewish history, far beyond the merely confrontational relationship between Esau and his brother Jacob recorded in our parasha.

Could it be that, once again, we have encountered a fulfillment of the principle of מַעֲשֵׂה אֲבוֹת סִמָּן לְבָנִים, that the deeds of the fathers are a signpost for the children?

If we examine the life of Esau and compare it with the

deeds of his progeny, we will find that the future roles that the descendants of Esau play are virtually mapped out in the life of Esau himself. In Genesis 36:2, Esau takes wives from the daughters of Canaan, despite the well-known Abrahamitic practice not to take wives from the daughters of Canaan (Genesis 24:3). Esau's wives are a source of great consternation to Isaac and Rebecca (Genesis 26:35). It is Esau's connection with the people (read: women) of Canaan that is one of the starkest indications that Esau's destiny is to be distant from the covenant of the patriarchs. And, so we see (Genesis 34:30), that while Jacob's sons are prepared to do battle with all the people of the land for the sake of the sanctity of their sister Dinah who was raped by Shechem, Esau and his sons freely marry the daughters of the Canaanites (Genesis 36:12, 20, 22).

A careful examination of Genesis 36 also suggests that there were many instances of incest and forbidden sexual relationships practiced within Esau's family. We learn, furthermore, that the Canaanite women introduced idolatry into the household. The rabbis even suggest (Genesis 27:1) that Isaac's eyes were weakened from the idolatrous incense that Esau's wives would offer up in the home.

The Midrash Rabbah on Leviticus 4:6, maintains that when the verse in Genesis 36:6 says that "Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all the souls of his house to Seir," that the use of the plural word "souls" (rather than "soul" that appears when describing Jacob's home), indicates that Esau's family members worshiped many gods. As far as his connection to the land of Israel—Esau clearly abandons the land, as the verse in Genesis 36:6 states: וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל אֶרְצוֹ, מִפְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב אָחִיו, Esau leaves the land because of Jacob his brother. He departs from Canaan to find a more suitable dwelling place.

Returning to the Tanchumah's rhetorical question. Didn't the Al-mighty have anything else to write?

Clearly the history of Esau's family as recorded in chapter 36, provides important information regarding the descendants of Esau, what kind of people they were, what kind of families they nurtured and what kind of commitment, or lack of commitment, they had to the land of Canaan. Genesis 36 is not only informative, it is, in fact, determinative. It clearly spells out what the future role of Esau will be, and boldly underscores the worthiness of Jacob and his family to carry on the Abrahamitic legacy.

All of this critical information is derived from Genesis 36, the chapter that the Al-mighty included, because He had nothing better to write!

Haftarat Vayishlach: Esav: From Edom to Rome

Dr. Moshe Sokolow (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarot, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

The book of Ovadiah is an anomaly among the books of Tanakh: It is only one chapter long! It is also anomalous in an additional sense: While we have few of the actual prophecies of such well-known prophets as Shmuel and Eliyahu, here we have the verbatim record of a prophet so little-known that exegetes cannot even agree on who he was or when he lived.

We shall attempt, first, to establish the literary and historical context of Ovadiah, and, in the process, make a significant point about the provenance of prophetic oratory. Following that identification, we will address the association between the prophecy of Ovadiah and the clash between Yaakov and Esav that evolves, typologically, throughout talmudic, midrashic, and medieval literature.

Part I: Dating Ovadiah

Two views dominate the exegetical discussion of Ovadiah: Rashi and Ibn Ezra.

(a) Rashi shares the talmudic-aggadic view of Ovadiah:

Why did Ovadiah [prophecy] uniquely on Edom and have no other prophecy? Our Sages said: Ovadiah was an Edomite proselyte (Sanhedrin 39b). God said, I shall undo them from within: Let Ovadiah – who lived among two wicked people, Achav and Izevel, and yet was not influenced by them – come and exact what is due from Esav – who [in contrast] lived among two righteous people, Yitzchak and Rivka, and yet was not influenced by them.

According to Chazal and Rashi, then, Ovadiah the prophet is one and the same as “Ovadiah the majordomo” of Achav (Melakhim Aleph 18:3), ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel c. 869–850 bce.

(b) Ibn Ezra, however, rejects this identification, arguing:

We cannot say that he is the one mentioned in the book of Melakhim during the era of Achav, because that Ovadiah is called “God fearing,” but if he were the prophet himself, how could he be called [only] “God fearing” and not “a prophet” since prophecy is the nobler of the two [epithets]?

Instead, Ibn Ezra offers an alternative identification:

In my opinion, “We heard a rumor” refers to this prophet, Yirmiyahu, Yeshayahu, and Amos, who [all] prophesied on Edom. Hence the use of [the plural]: “We heard.”

While Ibn Ezra’s opening remark: “*lo yadanu doro*” – “we know not his era,” indicates a reservation of some sort, it is

clear, nevertheless, that he would have us situate Ovadiah within the larger historical context of the other prophets he mentions, all of whom lived considerably later than the Ovadiah of Achav. Yeshayahu and Amos were roughly contemporary (c. 750–700 bce), while Yirmiyahu was even later (c. 625–586 bce).

An Independent Approach:

We propose, here, to take an independent approach to determining the date of Ovadiah, which we will then merge with the exegetical record.

We will compare the text of Ovadiah with a very similar Biblical text and evaluate their correspondences, situating Ovadiah within the literary and historical context that both of these texts reflect.

The most striking correspondences to the text of Ovadiah occur in the book of Yirmiyahu, chapter 49.

The striking overall similarity, underlined by significant verbal and literary nuances, is highly reminiscent of the correspondences enjoyed by the texts of Hoshea, Yeshayahu, Amos, and Michah, four prophets who lived at relatively contemporaneous times.

Logic dictates that just as the correspondences between Hoshea, Yeshayahu, Amos, and Michah are best understood as the result of their contemporaneousness, so should the correspondences between Ovadiah and Yirmiyahu be accounted for by the assumption that they were contemporaries.

Treating Similarities in Prophetic Literature

The assumption of contemporaneousness is borne out by a significant observation of Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508) that appears, not coincidentally, in his commentary on Yirmiyahu 49:19:

Behold! The text of this prophecy is the same as that of Ovadiah. How can this be? Did not our Sages teach that, “No two prophets use the same style”?

Rather this means that the other prophets did not prophesy in the same manner as Moshe. For Moshe received, prophetically, from God, not the subjects alone but the actual words as well. Just as he heard them, so he wrote them, verbatim, in the Torah.

Other prophets, however, in their prophecies, would see only the general outlines that God instructed them and they would transmit and record them in their own words.

Consequently, upon witnessing the same phenomenon they would often knowingly phrase it in the same words and style as had been employed by other prophets.

According to Abarbanel, then, the fact that Ovadiah and Yirmiyahu utilized “the same words and style” indicates that they were “witnessing the same phenomenon.” Just what phenomenon was that?

The Historical Context

If we knew nothing more about Yirmiyahu and Ovadiah than what we can extract from the two chapters we excerpted above, where would we place them chronologically?

The answer is: We would situate them in the context of a war that was being waged against Israel (קומו ונקומה) in the course of which, Edom, shamefully disregarding its fraternal relationship to Israel (מחמס אחיה), joined in the attack on Jerusalem (יַעֲקֹב תִּכְסֶּף בְּיָשָׁה), (כְּאָחֻד מֵהֶם). Adding insult to injury, the Edomites joined in the celebration over Israel’s defeat (וְאֵל תִּשְׂמַח לְבַנֵּי יְהוּדָה) (בְּיוֹם אֲבָדָם), participated in the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem (וְאֵל תִּשְׁלַחְנָה בְּהִילּוֹ בְּיוֹם אִידוֹ), and stood at the crossroads to either kill the survivors (וְאֵל תַּעֲמֹד עַל הַפְּרָק) (לְהַכְרִית אֶת פְּלִיטָיו) or to hand them over to their enemies (וְאֵל תִּסְגֵּר שְׂרִידָיו בְּיוֹם צָרָה).

Such events are consistent with the Biblical narratives of the Babylonian assault on Jerusalem in 586 bce in the books of Melakhim and Yirmiyahu, as well as with the poetic references found in Eikhah (4:22): “[God] will punish your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, He will uncover your sins,” and, somewhat curiously, in Psalm 137 verse 7, “Recall, O Lord, on account of the Edomites, the day of Jerusalem; how they said ‘raze it raze it unto its foundation.’”

We may then conclude this section by asserting that Ovadiah was a contemporary of Yirmiyahu, prophesying at the close of the era of the First Temple and may, like Yirmiyahu, have been an eye-witness to the Edomite perfidy he describes. We shall next observe how the Sages extended that perfidy through their identification of the destroyers of the First Temple with those who were later responsible for the destruction of the Second Temple.

Part II: Ovadiah, Esav, and Yaakov

“Saviors shall ascend Mt. Zion to judge the mount of Esau and sovereignty shall be the Lord’s.” (Ovadiah 1:21)

The Biblical and rabbinic worldview saw the elimination of evil as a necessary prerequisite for the establishment of the dominion of God. Just as that is symbolized in Ovadiah

by Mt. Zion’s (Israel’s) judgment of Mt. Esav (Edom), so too, it is symbolized in Talmud and Midrash by the termination of the fraternal conflict between Yaakov and Esav.

The reunion confrontation between Yaakov and Esav narrated in Vayishlach – to which our text serves as a haftarah – triggered a clutch of historical and legendary associations for the Sages of the Talmud and Midrash: Yaakov as Israel and, subsequently, Judaism; Esav/Edom as Rome, Byzantium and, subsequently, Christendom. In light of this, it is not difficult to imagine the Sages considering the destruction of the Second Temple as a reiteration of the destruction of the First Temple and casting the Romans in the role of the Edomites. “Scripture named Edom, and history pointed at Rome. By the most elementary syllogism, the two became one.”

Rome:

The earliest explicit evidence we have for this association appears in the wake of the Roman emperor Hadrian’s defeat of the forces of Bar Kokhba towards the middle of the second century CE. The Jerusalem Talmud reports:

R. Yehudah bar Ila’i said: Rabbi would expound on the verse: “The voice is Yaakov’s voice but the hands are Esav’s hands” [as follows]: The voice of Yaakov cries out on account of what Esav’s hands did to him at Betar. (Ta’anit 4)

R. Akiva, in designating Bar Kokhba the messianic king, invoked the verse: “darakh kokhav mi-Yaakov” – “a star will step forth from Jacob” (Bemidbar 24:17), whose continuation includes the prognosis: “he will annihilate the survivors of Ir.” To the Sages, Ir, a city par excellence, was none other than Urbs Roma, the city of Rome, capital of the evil empire.

His disciples followed suit. R. Meir punned on the word ראמים (Yeshayahu 34:7, wild oxen) to produce רומיים (Romans) and read משא רומי (Rome) for משא דומה (Dumah) in Yeshayahu 21:11. Another student, R. Shimon bar Yochai, referring to “calling to me from Seir” in the same verse, designates Edom as Israel’s final exile. More significantly, however, he is cited as coining a proverb:

“It is a well-known axiom: Esav hates Yaakov.” (Sifrei Bemidbar 69)

Other Tannaim adduced homilies supporting similar associations. On the Torah’s description of an infant Esav as “admoni” – “ruddy complexion” (Bereishit 25:25), R. Abba bar Kahana states: “kulo shofekh damim” – “they are all bloodthirsty” and R. Elazar bar Yosi treats the Latin word “senator” as an abbreviation for three Hebrew words: ונוטר, שונא, נוקם, (hostile, vindictive, and vengeful).

Byzantium:

When the Roman Empire in the fourth century, under Emperor Constantine, adopted Christianity, the identification of Esav as Rome extended to encompass Byzantium.

A striking example of this identification occurs in a passage from the Nistarot Shel Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a medieval apocalypse, which has been dated to the era of the Arab conquest of the Land of Israel in the early seventh century. Here is the pertinent passage from that work:

The second king of Yishmael will conquer all the kingdoms. He will come to Jerusalem and there he will bow [to the God of Israel]. He will wage war against the Edomites [Byzantines] who will flee before him, and he will rule stoutly. He will be a lover of Israel; he will seal their breaches and the breaches of the Temple; he will excavate Mt. Moriah and level it all off; [he will summon Israel to construct] the Temple. In his days, Judah will be saved and the flower of the son of David will blossom upon it.

A similar identification is made in the liturgical poetry of that era. In a piyyut by Shimon bar Magus (Israel; seventh century), we find the following closing lines, which take Yitzchak's blessing to Yaakov (Bereishit 27:28 ff.) as a prophetic prognosis.

שָׁמַע יַעֲבֹדוּךָ וְיִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּךָ בְּנֵי הָרְפָאִים הַיּוֹ גְבִיר עַל אֲדוֹמִים הַגָּאִים
תַּת אֲוִרְיָךְ אָרוּר זֶה אִישׁ אֲגַנִּי וּמְבַרְכֶיךָ בְּרוּךְ זֶה אִישׁ יְמִינִי.
[Yaakov] heard, "they will serve you" and "bow before you"
those apparitions

"Be the master" of the arrogant Edomites.

May "those who curse you be cursed" refers to the Agagite

And "those who bless you will be blessed" refers to the

Benjaminite.

Here, in addition to the "standard" identification of Edom with Rome, we are invited to make yet another insidious identification: Esav as Amalek. Just as Haman the Agagite [Agag was the King of Amalek during the reign of King Shaul (Shmuel Aleph ch. 15), who foolishly spared his antagonist's life] was brought down by Mordechai the Benjaminite [ostensibly, a descendant of Shaul], so will contemporary Edom be humbled by Israel.

The Holy Roman Empire:

Following the earlier paradigms of Edom=Rome and Edom=Byzantium, Ashkenazi Biblical exegetes in the Middle Ages identified Edom with the Holy Roman Empire.

Rashi (France, 1040–1105), for instance, interprets Eikhah 4:22: "[God] will punish your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, He will uncover your sins" (see supra.), as

follows:

Yirmiyahu prophesied about the destruction of the Second Temple, which would be destroyed by the Romans.

In the same spirit, Rashi also identifies the "fourth kingdom" of Nebuchadnezzar's vision (Daniel 2:40 ff.), whose downfall would usher in the Messianic Age, with Rome:

"In the days of these kings:" While the kingdom of the Romans is extant.

Manoach ben Chizkiyah (Chizkuni; France, thirteenth century), who continued in the exegetical tradition of Rashi, notes similarly (Devarim 28:50):

"A nation of fierce countenance:" This is the Kingdom of Rome, to wit: "At the End of Days, when evildoers perish, there will rise up a king of fierce countenance."

Nachmanides (1194–1270), too, is heir to this exegetical tradition. Witness his commentary on Bereishit 47:1, locating his own contemporary situation within the typological framework recognized by Rashi in Daniel:

I have already noted (Bereishit 43:14) that Yaakov's descent to Egypt [foreshadows] our present exile at the hands of the fourth creature (Daniel 7:7): evil Rome.

While acknowledging the typology of Edom=Rome, Nachmanides seems somewhat ambivalent about the historical implications of that equation. On the one hand, he extends the equation backwards into an historical period that even precedes the birth of Esav! In commenting on the battle waged by Avraham against four Mesopotamian kings (Bereishit 14:1), he identifies the "מֶלֶךְ גּוֹיִם," literally: "the king of the Nations," as follows:

He was the king over various nations who made him their chief and officer. This is an allusion to the king of Rome who was set to rule over a city assembled from among many nations: Kitim, Edom, and others.

On the other hand, he is critical of Rashi's blanket assertion of that equation. In the genealogical lists and "king lists" of Edom, he has the following to say about "Magdiel" (Bereishit 36:43):

Magdiel is Rome. This is Rashi's interpretation, but I find it unintelligible. If we were to say that it is a prophecy for the distant future, there were many kings who ruled over Edom until the Roman Empire. [Furthermore,] Rome is not a chieftain [of Edom], but a large, fearsome and extremely powerful empire, with no peer among kingdoms.

Epilogue:

The continuing association of the Biblical Esav/Edom with imperial Rome, classical Byzantium and the medieval Holy Roman Empire attests to the power of exegesis to

transform the current and contemporary into the timeless and perpetual.

Here, to close the main part of our study, are the opening lines from a famous poem by Yehudah Ha-Levi (1075–1141) that reflects the status of the Land of Israel as part of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. They indicate that even in countries ruled by Islam, the equation of Edom with Rome, and the anticipated destruction of Rome as the signal of the ultimate redemption, remained vibrant.

Fear and Concern

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

Throughout the world there are heated conversations about the war activities in Gaza. Knowing that world Jewry is supportive of our righteous actions to defend Israel, hundreds of thousands of Jews and non-Jews in North America and the United Kingdom have rallied on behalf of Israel. To show support for our chayalim and for the freeing of our hostages. We will be victorious because we have no choice and because we are united throughout the world to achieve this just goal.

Yet it is not only our cause that is righteous, but the way we are waging the war, too, with concern for the needs of civilians in Gaza, a population that lies somewhere between guilt and innocence, a factor in military decision making. This is true even as Hamas has taken over their hospitals and kindergartens, with “civilian” homes used for storing munitions caches and disguising hidden tunnels built underneath their domiciles, and with long- and short-range missiles nestled in the orchards. The question of how to think about this civilian population is anything but straightforward.

While international law would allow us to destroy locations that have been turned into factories of warfare, our military tries to differentiate between terrorists and those civilians who are not proactively engaged in warfare against Israel. This is why the IDF has been careful entering hospitals which were used as terrorist headquarters, places through which hostages were tunneled to other parts of Gaza. We have been risking our soldiers’ lives instead of carpet-bombing areas with these tunnels and arms caches. We have been providing safe passage out of the North of Gaza, allowing for humanitarian convoys, and announcing to civilians in multiple ways to leave the area, in order to limit casualties.

לְבִי בְּמִזְרַח וְאֲנֹכִי בְּסוֹף מִעֲרָב אֵיךְ אֶטְעֶמָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֲכַל וְאֵיךְ יַעֲרַב
אֵיכָה אֲשַׁלֵּם נְדָרַי וְאֶסְרִי, בְּעוֹד צִיּוֹן בְּחֶבֶל אֲדוֹם וְאֲנִי בְּכַבֵּל עֲרָב.
*My heart is in the East – and I am at the edge of the West.
How can I possibly taste what I eat?
How could it please me?
How can I keep my promise or ever fulfill my vow,
when Zion is held by Edom
and I am bound by Arabia’s chains?*

Yaakov Avinu, like us in Israel and our men and women in the IDF, found himself approaching a hostile enemy. With four hundred men in tow, Eisav approaches Yaakov, who is accompanied by his family and his flock. Unsure of the upshot of meeting with his brother Eisav, who years earlier had committed to killing him, Yaakov is concerned. The Torah describes these emotions using somewhat redundant language – Vayira Yaakov meod vayetzer lo, ‘And Yaakov was fearful and concerned.’ Why the use of the dual terminology of fear (vayira) and concern (vayetzer)?

Rashi, citing Breishit Raba, suggests that Yaakov has, in fact, two different concerns regarding the encounter that lies ahead of him. ‘And Yaakov was fearful – lest he or members of his family be murdered; and he was concerned – lest he kill others.’ With a potential battle on the horizon, Yaakov is not only fearful for his own life and that of his family; he is, in that very moment, deeply concerned about the prospect of killing others.

This concern for killing others, however, is puzzling, as Yaakov has a halakhic responsibility to protect himself and his family. As the Talmud states ‘if one approaches to kill you, you shall preempt them and kill them.’ In fact, that is why the current war in Gaza is classified as a milchemet mitzvah, an obligatory war, because like in Jacob’s situation it is about defending our lives. The Maharal, in his supercommentary on Rashi entitled Gur Aryeh, explains that Yaakov thought that perhaps some of Eisav’s entourage was forced to join the posse against

Jacob and his family without any interest in harming Yaakov. If the members of Eisav’s clan were intent on attacking Yaakov and his family, then it would be not only appropriate, but even required to destroy them. But if they had no intention of attacking Yaakov and his family, then Yaakov was concerned about the possibility of killing them

– even though, as part of a group of enemy combatants, their lives could morally be a form of collateral damage .

Yaakov's concern is based on our moral compass striving to do what is right and just. We wage war based on our values. We are not like the terrorists, who have only brought death and destruction to their own citizens, to us in Israel, and to all of human society. We believe in life and in goodness. That is why Yaakov feels pulled by his concern that even in war we need to be just – even if the consequence of such a paradigm puts ourselves at greater risk. We are not just concerned with protecting our own lives, but in doing our very best to make sure we protect the lives of the innocent or quasi-innocent. After all, we are Jacob's children .

To root out Hamas, to ensure both national and

global security, let alone some modicum of justice, is certainly justified. But we have all heard from soldiers and commanders on the front lines as they navigate the war strategy for Gaza, sharing their concerns of how to exercise the right dosage of restraint, so as not to sacrifice either our soldiers' safety or other Jewish values. How do we maintain our humanity, as we carefully respect the humanity of others yet unflinchingly take out those who deny our humanity and have debased their own? It is this caution and thoughtfulness with which the Jewish people wage war, in a manner that many militaries could never imagine. It is in the spirit of Yaakov that we carry our banner, attuned to the complex calculations of warfare – yet fully prepared to wage this just obligatory war.

The Greatest Female Jewish Influencer You've Never Heard Of

Rabbi Johnny Solomon

In the same chapter in which the death of Rachel our matriarch is mentioned, Parshat Vayishlach records the death of Devorah the former wet nurse of Rivka:

'Devorah, Rivka's wet nurse, died and was buried under the oak tree outside Beit El. And so it was named 'Oak of Weeping' (Alon Bachut)' (Bereishit 35:8).

It is significant that in the verse immediately previous to this we are reminded that Beit El was where Yaakov received a divine revelation. Accordingly, it seems clear that the death of Devorah was a major event. Moreover, the very fact that the place of her burial was named 'Oak of Weeping' clearly indicates that there was an outpouring of grief when Devorah died. But why was this so? And what made Devorah so special?

There is one further reference to Devorah earlier on in the Torah, in Parshat Chayei Sarah, when Eliezer returns from Aram Naharaim with Rivka who has been selected as the prospective wife of his master's son Yitzchak. There we are told that when Rivka departed, she was 'sent on her way, together with her wet nurse [Devorah], and with Avraham's servant [Eliezer] and his men' (Bereishit 24:59). But why is Rivka travelling with her wet nurse, especially as she is now about to start a new chapter of her life?

To answer these and other related questions, I would like to summarise a brilliant essay by Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Neria (found in Ner LaMaor on Bereishit 24:59) where he helps us understand who Devorah was.

Until now we have identified Devorah as Rivka's wet nurse, and given this, it is important for us to recall the

esteem with which our sages held Rivka. For example, when Rivka's father, brother and geographic origin is repeated in Bereishit 25:20, our Sages (Bereishit Rabbah 63:4 as quoted by Rashi ibid.) explain that this is done to, 'tell us of her praise', and that, 'even though Rivka was the daughter of the wicked Betuel, and even though she was the sister of the wicked Lavan, and even though she lived in a society of wicked people, she did not learn from their [wicked] ways'. As the Midrash then proceeds to explain, Rivka is the paradigm of, 'a lily among the thorns' (Shir HaShirim 2:2) - meaning that she is the exemplar of someone who is able to spiritually survive and flourish notwithstanding the fact that they are living in a spiritually toxic environment.

Beyond this, when Rivka marries Yitzchak, this is described by the Torah in a way that suggests that she is equivalent in stature and spirituality to Sarah (see Bereishit 24:67 & Rashi). The question then is, other than her own inner morality and spirituality, who contributed to the formation of Rivka's spiritual personality, and the answer is: Devorah.

Devorah – from the very moment she started working as Rivka's wet nurse - functions as Rivka's role model, teacher, positive influence and spiritual parent. And this is why, when Rivka left her home in which her only source of positive spiritual guidance was Devorah, she insisted that Devorah come with her.

Throughout the years Devorah was a permanent presence in Yitzchak and Rivka's household, and whatever

the challenge, Rivka had Devorah to turn to and to learn from. Later on, when Rivka's son Yaakov was being tricked and deceived by her brother Lavan, who does she send to ensure that Yaakov leaves Lavan's home? Devorah! Devorah had worked for Betuel as Rivka's wet nurse, and she'd known Lavan in his earlier years. So when Rivka felt that Yaakov may need some help to extricate himself from her brothers household, she sent Devorah as Rashi explains in his commentary to Bereishit 35:8: 'When Rivka said to Yaakov, "then I will send and bring you from there" (Bereishit 27:45) she sent Devorah to him to Padam Aram to tell Yaakov to depart from there.'

Of course, even before this point Yaakov would have certainly known Devorah very well. However, it seems likely that while she was there, Devorah taught, inspired and spiritually strengthened Yaakov which would have further forged his bond with this incredibly holy and wise grandmother-like figure. This then explains why, as the verse seems to imply in our parsha and as the Kli Yakar states explicitly, Yaakov not only eulogized Devorah and not only cried extensively when she died, but he actually delivered such an extensive eulogy that he began his words while he was in Beit El, and only completed his eulogy when he arrived just outside of the city.

Given all this the question we must now ask is who was the spiritual guide and influencer who inspired and educated Devorah? To this Rabbi Neria suggests a powerful answer: Avraham and Sarah.

We are told that Avraham and Sarah 'made souls in Haran' (Bereishit 12:5) – meaning that they educated and inspired men and women who were interested in learning about God and morality. Of those, some likely followed Avraham and Sarah on their journey to the land of Israel, while others would have sought local projects where they could teach and be an example of doing 'what is right and just' (Bereishit 18:19). According to Rabbi Neria, Devorah was one of those souls who had been educated and inspired by Sarah and Avraham, and she sought to establish some outreach efforts in the nearby Aram Naharayim. There she encountered the family of Avraham's brother Nachor - whose son was Betuel, whose grandson was Lavan, and whose granddaughter was Rivka.

Due to her feeling of indebtedness to Avraham, Devorah decided to work for the family and to serve as Rivka's wet nurse, and while doing so, she realized that though her efforts could not change the evil ways of Betuel and Lavan, she had a chance to be a positive influence on young Rivka. Accordingly, she dedicated herself to doing just this, while

teaching Rivka the wisdom that she'd learnt from Avraham, and specifically from Sarah.

Bringing all this together, we now understand why Rivka keeps Devorah by her side; why Rivka is later described as being comparable to Sarah having been taught Torah even as a baby from Sarah's greatest student Devorah, why Yaakov eulogizes Devorah, and why her death triggered such an outpouring of grief that her place of burial is then called 'Oak of Weeping'.

Devorah was a student of Avraham and Sarah. She was Rivka's teacher, role model and spiritual parent. And she was Yaakov's mentor, guide, coach and source of salvation. Sadly, too few of us know about Devorah. But it seems clear that she was truly the Greatest Female Jewish Influencer.