

SELECTIONS FROM NOAM ELIMELEKH

Ongoing Text Study Program
The Institute for Jewish Spirituality

Vayishlach (8)

Peshat:

s.v. *o yomar vayishlach etc. mal'akhim*

“[Jacob] **sent messengers** [ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, and instructed them as follows, ‘Thus shall you say, ‘To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now; I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor’”]” (Gen. 32:4-6)

[R. Elimelekh identifies a number of problems present in these verses, based on Rashi and the midrash, to which he responds as follows. We begin not quite half way through the lesson, with the words *akh ha'inyan hu*]

This is how we should understand it, regarding the way of *tzaddikim*, when they speak with people: they demand of themselves that their words are heard in their full meaning: One: the simple meaning for the person with whom they speak; two, that the essence of their intention is that the content of their speech be prayer and supplication before the Omnipresent. The intention here is that the *tzaddik* conceals her words of prayer within conversation with people, without expressing her need in prayer directly. They do this because of the Accuser, so that he will understand not the *tzaddik's* intention, to insert prayer in her words. That way the Accuser will not interfere with the *tzaddik*, since they do not know that this conversation is actually prayer.

With this in mind, our passage and its problems are all established. First, this explains why it was that Jacob sent angels (*mal'akhim*) before him, rather than human emissaries. Jacob's intention was that the angels would speak words that will sound like appeasement (*ritzui*) to Esau while also serving as words of acceptance (*ratzon*) in prayer and supplication before the Omnipresent. These words of prayer would serve as advocates on his behalf before the Blessed One. That is why it was proper and right for Jacob to send actual angels: is there a human being who can serve as an advocate as well as an angel of *YHVH* of Hosts? This is supported by the midrash that reports that the angels were Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, who serve constantly as advocates on behalf of Israel.

How shall we understand Jacob's instructions to the angels? He begins: “**Thus shall you say**”. This implies: “Your speech shall be in this manner, and with this intention shall you say all of the words that you will speak. That is, speak them “**To my lord**”: your intention shall be focused on the Lord of all things, may the Creator's memory be exalted forever! But, these words also retain their simple meaning, addressed “**to Esau**”, so that they might serve as appeasement to him. This is why he instructed them to say “**Thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed (garty) with Laban**”. The word *GaRTY* has two meanings. One advocates on Jacob's behalf before God, reminding God that Jacob had

kept all six-hundred thirteen (*TaRYa" G*) commandments, and so this merit should stand for him and save him from Esau. But, the simple meaning also remains, as appeasement and subjugation before Esau, informing him that Jacob had not become a minister or some other important personage during his time apart. This is why Rashi uses the idiom "Another interpretation (*davar acher*): to indicate that they should insert their intention into the words that they say before Esau – "**I stayed with Laban**" – that he understand them on their simple level, and the angels should intend "Something else (*davar acher*)", i.e. advocacy on Jacob's behalf, because he kept the *TaRYa" G* commandments.

The same process can be seen in Jacob's declaration "**I have acquired cattle** (*shor*), **asses** (*chamor*)". To Esau this would sound concrete: Isaac's blessing ("May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth"; Gen. 27:28) has not yet come about, [as Jacob's wealth is constituted of neither]. But, the angels were to intend in these words to remind God the merit of the great *tzaddikim*, Joseph and the Messiah son of David.

"**I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining favor**": Jacob also prayed when instructing the angels, saying "**I am sending you**": "In sending you, my intention is to speak before my Lord, my Creator, the One Who formed me, and to recall my merit and that of the righteous before You, to find favor in God's eyes". Thus, "the One who recalls the loving faithfulness of the Patriarchs" will then raise up our remembrance before God for compassion and acceptance. Amen.

Drash:

The point of the lesson appears above. What follows is R. Elimelekh's introduction, with the relevant sources inserted and explicated where necessary.

Rashi commented on the word "messengers (*mal'akhim*)": actual angels (*mal'akhim*). "I stayed with Laban" (Gen. 32:5): Rashi interpreted:

I was not made a magistrate or an important personage, but remained a stranger (*ger*). Further, there is no reason, then, for you to hate me on account of your father's blessings, for he blessed me "be a master over your brothers" (Gen. 27:29), and it has not been fulfilled for me. Another interpretation (*davar acher*): "I stayed with (*GaRTY*)", the word is equal to the number *TaRYa" G* (613), by which Jacob intended to say: "I stayed with that wicked one Laban, but I kept the *TaRYa" G* commandments, and I did not learn from his ways".

"I have acquired cattle and asses" (Gen. 32:6): Rashi interpreted:

Father said to me: "[May God give you] of the dew of the heaven and fat of the earth" (Gen. 27:28), and this wealth is neither of the sky nor of the earth.

The Tanhuma adds this interpretation (Tanhuma, Vayishlach 1):

"I have acquired cattle": I need not fear you, for Joseph has already been born, he who is identified as an ox ("like a firstling bull in his majesty"; Deut. 33:17).

"And asses": this is the Messiah, son of David, as Scripture says, "[Rejoice greatly, Fair Zion; raise a shout, Fair Jerusalem! Lo, your king is coming to you. He is victorious, triumphant,] yet humble, riding on an ass, [on a donkey foaled by a she-ass]" (Zach. 9:9).

The problems with these verses and their interpretations are many:

1. Regarding Rashi's interpretation that Jacob sent actual angels: we must understand why he would send them to Esau. It would have sufficed to send humans and to place his words – what they should say to Esau – in their mouths, and not to bother angels.
2. “Thus shall you say to my lord Esau”: what compelled Jacob, in his own home, to address Esau as “my lord”? Surely it would have been enough for them to have said to Esau “Thus says your servant”, so what was the significance of his telling the angels to say “my lord” in his own home?
3. “To Esau (*le'esav*)”: the *lamed* at the start of the word is incomprehensible. This is what he should have said: “Thus shall you say to my lord Esau” (rather than, “to my lord, to Esau” as the *lamed* would suggest).
4. “I stayed with Laban”: Rashi says that this means he kept all *TaRYa*”G commandments. How does this signify that Jacob seeks to “find your favor”? Would this, indeed, make him favorable to Esau? The opposite would be true: it would enrage him that Jacob takes pride in having kept all the commandments! Moreover, this would confirm for Esau that he is not afraid of him.
5. Rashi's first interpretation of this phrase, “I was not made a magistrate or an important personage”, fits the situation, as it would indicate subjugation, such that then he would find favor in Esau's eyes. But, according to the “another interpretation (*davar acher*)” this doesn't work out, as it would not find favor.
6. Also, the midrash “ox, this is Joseph etc.” does not work out to find favor. Rather, this, too, indicates that he is not afraid of Esau, for the merit of the righteous protects him.

This concludes R. Eliezer's introductory section. In it we see how he lays the groundwork for his spiritual commentary, indicating where Jacob's words seem inappropriate or confusing. He keys on the teaching that Jacob sends actual angels as his emissaries, and he plays on the dual meaning of the word to open up the rest of the lesson. In each instance, he can demonstrate where there are two meanings to the statement: one superficial, to ingratiate himself to Esau, to protect and defend his household; one directed as prayer to God, the true source of safety and assurance.

Contrast this Hasidic emphasis on prayer to the rabbinic view of Jacob's preparation for his confrontation with Esau (Eccl. R. 9:27):

“Wisdom is more valuable than weapons of war” (Eccl. 9:18): this refers to the wisdom of our father Jacob; “than weapons of war”: of the wicked Esau. R. Levi said: Jacob equipped his sons and servants with weapons underneath and clothed them in white garments on top. He then prepared himself for three things: prayer, a gift, and battle. For prayer, as Scripture says, “Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother” (Gen. 32:12). For a gift, as Scripture says, “You shall say: ‘They are your servant Jacob's, it is a present sent to my lord’” (ibid. 19). For battle, as Scripture says, “He put the handmaids and their children first... and he himself went on ahead and bowed low to the ground” (ibid. 33:2 f.). He said, “It is better that he should attack me and not my children”.

Remez:

1. Generally the rabbis advocate speech that is “the same in the heart as in the mouth”. In your reading, does this lesson contradict this rule? How, or why not?
2. The word *mal’akh* means emissary, and has been understood also to mean angel. What do you understand angels to be? How would explain the relationship between our words (particularly words of prayer) and angels? Between people and angels?
3. When, if ever, have you lived with a “Laban” figure? What was it like? How were you able to maintain your integrity, keep from becoming like this other, cunning, deceptive, deceitful person?

Sod:

In this lesson we learn more about how R. Elimelekh understood (and promoted) the work of the Tzaddik. In his generation, the Tzaddik was emerging as the central figure within local communities (as town rabbis, *maggidim*, *dayyanim* etc., and as leaders of their Hasidic followers). Some of their authority was based in their knowledge – like other rabbinic authorities – but more and more it grew from their charismatic and shamanic activities. The Tzaddik was able, and obligated, to provide “life, children and sustenance” for his followers, to intercede on their behalf in the divine realms, to heal the sick and annul evil decrees. In contrast to other rabbinic figures – both the pietistic *hasidim* of earlier generations, and contemporary community leaders in particular – the Tzaddik was a public figure. He was not a secluded ascetic or scholar, but engaged in the life and concerns of his people.

The question could – and was – asked: If the Tzaddik is engaged with the public at large, involved with the particular concerns of individuals, when and how does he accomplish his intercessory work? When and how does he ascend to the divine realm to redirect the flow of *shefa*, to heal the sick and protect his people? We can read our lesson as an answer to these questions. The Tzaddik has the capacity to do two things at once: to engage in seemingly mundane conversation and also direct his prayers to God. He can conceal his prayers and intercessory supplications in the stories he tells, his mundane conversations, the lessons he preaches. He may appear to be in this world, but he is simultaneously in the divine realms.

In our lesson, the content of Jacob’s prayer, that is, the prayer of the Tzaddik, is one of advocacy for his people, seeking acceptance, forgiveness and love from God. He did not pray that God deal directly with Esau: to strike him or harm him to prevent his attacking. This may reflect R. Elimelekh’s situation, one in which Jews had no power and could not respond to attacks on them with violence. Apparently, the rabbis of the midrash cited above, considered “battle” a potential, and legitimate response. And, even today, it may be that there is no other option but to repel violence with violence, to defend life at the cost of life (cf. Gen.R. 76:2). But, even when confronting violent force, we can still also pray for God’s favor, for protection and that all emerge whole and well.

But, it is not only violence or physical harm that we face, or that faced Jacob. We are always negotiating power, exerting our will – or seeking to – and responding to others as they press on us. R. Elimelekh invites us to consider how we speak to those with whom we may be in contention, those with whom we are negotiating power. We must surely speak clearly and honestly, stating our case and holding to that which we desire. We are right to press for our preferred outcome. But, what should be our inner attitude? What “subtext” might we include in our words? R. Elimelekh teaches one: we can pray for our own wellbeing, that we feel safe even when facing danger, that we feel happy even in conflict, that we sense ourselves to be strong in dispute, the we accept that even in this disagreement our lives are unfolding with ease. That is one way of understanding the prayer for *ratzon*: that this moment be, even in conflict, acceptable to us, present, welcome.

When we are able to include this prayer for ourselves even as we are in conflict with another, we might discover that we are able – even wish – to include something similar for our opponent. Even as we strive to prevail in our conflict, desiring a particular outcome, we do not truly intend the defeat or destruction of the other. That which we seek for our sake we wish also for all others. The outcome we seek, when we are mindful, when we are completely honest with our self, is so that ultimately all may benefit and thrive. So, even as we resist the other and their efforts, even as we object to their plans, we do not wish their demise. We want them, too, to feel safe, happy, strong and at ease. Knowing that is our true intention and deepest desire helps us act with the greatest integrity, for our sake and for the sake of all. Even in defeat, we wish our opponents well, and seek their ultimate wellbeing.

Keeping our own hearts balanced in such moments of conflict and contention allows us to remain clear-sighted and avoid overstating our case or pressing too hard against our opponent. We will not demonize the other, reminded instead of their shared humanity. It helps us remember that in the end our own wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of all. We find that our prayer for ourselves naturally turns to a prayer for the other. Even as we speak and negotiate, exert power and respond to force, we can have a prayer in our own hearts: may I feel safe, may I feel happy, may my body support me, may my life unfold with ease; may my opponent feel safe, feel happy, feel strong and at ease. This is ultimately a prayer for peace for all.

Translation and Commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Slater
© Institute for Jewish Spirituality 2011