



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview



- **Parashah: Vayishlach** (וישֶׁלַח, “and he sent”)
- **Chapters: Genesis 32:3 – 36:43**

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Last week’s Torah portion (Vayetzei) told how Jacob escaped his brother Esau’s wrath by fleeing to his relatives in Haran. On his way there, God appeared to him in a dream of a ladder reaching from the ground to the sky, with the angels of God climbing up and down, and there renewed the covenant of Abraham with him. However, after arriving in Haran and agreeing to work as Laban’s hired hand for seven years to marry his daughter Rachel, his uncle tricked him into marrying his older daughter Leah first, and then demanded that he work seven more years to earn the right to Rachel’s hand.

The two sisters (and their handmaidens) then vied for Jacob’s love by giving birth to his eleven sons (and one daughter). Meanwhile Jacob worked another six years to earn his own livestock, but he was finally forced to flee Haran because of his uncle’s relentless oppression and deception.

This week’s portion begins with Jacob sending messengers to his estranged brother Esau in the land of Edom in hope of reconciliation, but the messengers returned to report that his brother was approaching with 400 armed men. Jacob then prayed for deliverance, prepared for war, and sent Esau a series of gifts in an attempt to appease him.

That night, Jacob took his family and possessions across the Jabbok River, but he remained behind and was left alone. And there “a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day” - (this “man” is later identified as the Angel of the LORD). During the “grappling” (recall the meaning of Jacob’s name), Jacob suffered a dislocated hip but vanquished the angel, who bestowed on him the name “Israel,” which means “he who prevails over God.” Jacob then asked the Angel for *His* Name, but was denied, since the Name is unutterable - even to one who had prevailed with God. Israel then called the name of the place *Peniel* (meaning “the face of God”) since “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been spared” (Gen. 32:30)

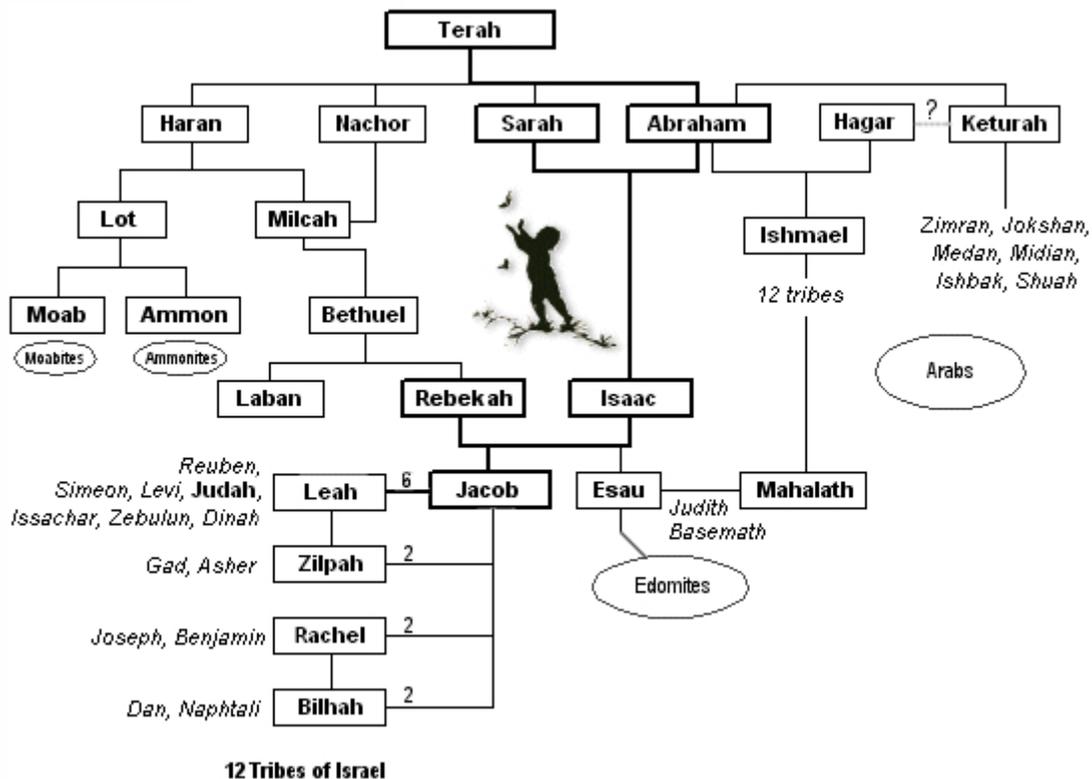
Later that morning, when Jacob finally saw his brother again, Esau ran to Jacob, embraced him, and they wept together. Jacob then introduced his wives and children. Esau then asked about all the gifts that were sent to him, and told Jacob he didn’t need them, but Jacob insisted that he keep them, “for I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God, and you have accepted me” (an indirect reference to his experience of “God wrestling” the previous night).



After their reconciliation, Esau invited Jacob to live with him in Edom, but instead Jacob purchased a plot of land near the city of Shechem and built an altar there. After settling into the land, Jacob’s only daughter Dinah decided to visit some of the local women but was abducted and raped by the crown prince of the city. Outraged by the violation of their sister, Dinah’s brothers Simeon and Levi avenged the deed by murdering all male inhabitants of the city, after rendering them vulnerable by convincing them to circumcise themselves (the other brothers despoiled the city, taking all the livestock and wealth, and enslaving the women and children).

After the destruction of Shechem, God commanded Jacob to leave that area and continue on to Bethel, where he first built an altar to the LORD and made his vow. There God (again) renamed him Israel and renewed His promise to give Canaan to his descendants. After this, Jacob traveled back to his hometown of Hebron, but on the way Rachel died while giving birth to Jacob’s twelfth son Benjamin (“son of the right hand”) and was buried beside the road to Bethlehem. Some time after the death of Rachel, Jacob’s son Rueben slept with Rachel’s handmaiden Bilhah – a transgression that ultimately cost him his status as the first-born son of Israel.

Jacob finally made it back home to Hebron where he was reunited with his 180-year-old father Isaac (his mother Rebecca had already died before his arrival). Some time later, Isaac died and was buried by Jacob and Esau. Since there wasn’t enough room for the twins to live together in the land, Esau decided to settle in Mount Seir (in land of Edom), a land that he and his descendants inhabited for many years to come. The portion concludes with a genealogy of Esau, his wives, children and grandchildren, and the family histories of the people of Seir among whom Esau settled.





Parashah Questions



1. What does *vayishlach* (וַיִּשְׁלַח) mean? (Gen. 32:3) ¹
2. Whom did Jacob send before him to meet with Esau? ²
3. How did Esau respond to the messengers Jacob sent to him? (32:3-6) ³
4. Why was Jacob “afraid and distressed” because of Esau? (32:7) ⁴
5. What three things did Jacob do to prepare for his meeting with Esau? ⁵
6. Whom did Jacob fight when he went back across the Jabbok river, and who won? ⁶
7. What are we not allowed to eat in memory of this event? (32:25) ⁷
8. What new name did the Angel gave Jacob? (32:27-28) ⁸
9. Why didn’t the Angel tell Jacob his name? (32:29) ⁹
10. What did Jacob name this place? (32:30) ¹⁰
11. How many times did Jacob prostrate himself before Esau? (Gen. 33:3) ¹¹

¹ The word *vayishlach* means “and he sent,” from the verb *shalach* (שָׁלַח), “to send.”

² Jacob sent “messengers” (מַלְאָכָיו) before him to Esau his brother to the land of *Seir* (שֵׁעִיר) in the country of Edom (אֲדוֹם). Note that midrash states that Esau named the place he lived *Seir* (“goat”) to remember how his brother wore the skin of goats when he stole his blessing by tricking Isaac into blessing him. Because the Hebrew word *malakhim* can mean “angels,” some of the sages claim that Jacob dispatched angels for his mission.

³ The messengers reported that Esau was coming to “meet” him (fight) with an army of 400 men (some commentators say the 400 men were each generals who led their own battalions).

⁴ Despite being promised God’s protection and blessing (at Bethel), Jacob was still afraid of his brother Esau because he had stole the birthright and blessing from him... Guilt is a powerful debilitator, even to the faithful. The Midrash Rabbah states that Jacob was afraid that he might be killed, and distressed that he might kill.

⁵ Jacob split up his camp into two groups so that one could escape. He reasoned, “If Esau comes to the one camp and attacks it, then the camp that is left will escape.” Next and he prepared lavish gifts to be sent to Esau to placate his brother’s anger. Finally he prayed for deliverance and confessed that he was completely unworthy of God’s favor: “O LORD... I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant...”

⁶ Jacob wrestled with the Angel of the LORD; Jacob “won” the match but was injured in his hip. Wrestling for God’s blessing is part of the walk of faith: As Tozer wrote, “Beware of any leader who does not walk with a limp.”

⁷ Because of Jacob’s limp, we do not eat *gid hanasheh*, literally the “nerve (or sinew) of forgetfulness,” from the root word *nashah* meaning to “forget” (see Gen. 41:51). It is unclear what *gid ha’nasheh* is...

⁸ The Angel called him *Yisrael*, a play of words: “for as a prince (*sar*) you have prevailed (*sarita*) with God.” Some also say Israel means “Yashar El” (יֵשָׁר אֵל), “God’s honest (or upright) man.”

⁹ The Angel could not disclose His Name because he was *Hameforash* – YHVH.

¹⁰ Jacob called it Peniel (פְּנֵי אֵל), because he saw God “face to face” (פְּנֵי אֵל-פְּנֵי אֵל) and yet was delivered.

¹¹ Seven times. Likewise “the maidservants and their children drew near and prostrated themselves. And Leah and her children drew near and prostrated themselves, and after [them], Joseph and Rachel drew near and prostrated themselves” (Gen. 33:3-7).



12. What did Esau do when he saw Jacob? (33:4) ¹²
13. After their reconciliation, where did Esau and Jacob go? (33:16-17) ¹³
14. Why did Jacob say he would meet with Esau in Seir? (33:14) ¹⁴
15. What did Simeon and Levi do to the city of Shechem, and why? ¹⁵
16. What did Jacob say in response to their actions? (34:30) ¹⁶
17. What was Deborah, Rebekah’s nurse, doing with Jacob? (35:8) ¹⁷
18. To whom did Rachel give birth in this Torah portion? (35:18) ¹⁸
19. Why was Rachel buried on the road to Efrat, that is Bethlehem? (35:19) ¹⁹
20. Why did Rachel die so young? ²⁰
21. How does Jewish tradition understand Reuben’s actions with Bilhah? (35:22) ²¹
22. How old was Isaac when he died? (35:29) ²²



¹² He kissed him, though in the Torah scroll the word for “and he kissed him” (i.e., *vayisha-kehu*: וַיִּשָּׂאֵהוּ) is marked with a dot over each letter, suggesting something odd (e.g., Esau kissed him to see if he was hiding any jewels, weapons, etc., or because the kiss was insincere).

¹³ Esau went back to Seir, while Jacob went to “Sukkot” (סֻכּוֹת), a location apparently near Shechem.

¹⁴ “We have searched the whole of Scriptures and do not find that Jacob ever went to Esau to the mountain of Seir. Is it then possible that Jacob, the truthful one, should deceive him? But when would he come to him? In the Messianic Era, when “the saviors shall ascend Mount Zion to judge the mountain of Esau” (Obad. 1:21). They killed the inhabitants of the city because the prince of the city (Hamor) abducted Dinah.

¹⁵ They killed the inhabitants of the city because the prince of the city (Hamor) abducted Dinah.

¹⁶ Jacob told them, “You made me ugly in the eyes of the land.”

¹⁷ Rebekah had earlier said to Jacob, “I will send and bring you from there” (Gen. 27:45), i.e., from Haran, and she sent Deborah to summon him from there, though Deborah died on the way back to the promised land. According to midrash, Rebekah died a short time later. This explains why, immediately following the mention of Deborah’s death, the Torah says that “God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan Aram, and blessed him” (Gen. 35:9). The sages explain that God visited to give Jacob the mourner’s blessing for the death of his mother.

¹⁸ Rachel gave birth to a baby boy she called Ben Oni (בֶּן־אֹנִי), “son of my affliction,” though Jacob renamed him Ben-Yamin (בֶּן־יָמִין), “son of [בֶּן] the right hand [יָמִין].”

¹⁹ Jacob foresaw that the exiles from Jerusalem would pass that way and therefore buried her there so that she might pray for mercy for them. Thus it is written (Jer. 31:15): “A voice is heard in Ramah... Rachel weeping for her children...” (Midrash Rabbah). Rachel’s tomb is less than a mile from Bethlehem.

²⁰ Because Jacob unwittingly cursed her when he said that the one who stole Laban’s idols should be put to death (see Genesis 31:32). According to tradition, she was 36 years old when she died (Seder Olam Rabbah). Leah died seven years later, at the age of 44.

²¹ The Talmud (Shabbat 55a) claims that Reuben did not literally sleep with Bilhah but only “relocated his father’s bed” by moving it into the tent of his mother Leah. Rashi comments that Jacob’s bed always was located in Rachel’s tent, but after her death he moved it to Bilhah’s tent. Reuben resented his mother’s humiliation and therefore arose to moved Jacob’s bed to Leah’s tent. Question: What is the *motive* behind this midrash?

²² Isaac was 180 years old (which is over 40 years after he blessed Jacob, when he initially thought he was going to die, see Gen. 27:1). Both Esau and Jacob buried him at the Cave of Machpelah.



Discussion Topics:

1. Jacob prepared “and sent” (*vayishlach*) gifts to Esau in the hope that this might “appease” his anger. Note that the word translated “appease” comes from the verb *kafar* (כָּפַר), from which the word “atonement” is derived (i.e., *kippur*: כִּפּוּר). Does this imply that Jacob needed to *atone* for his sins against his brother? (Gen. 32:13-20)
2. What are we to make of the idea that Jacob wrestled with the Angel of the LORD? How can we make sense of this theophany?
3. Before the wrestling match ended, Jacob refused to let the Angel of the LORD go until he received his blessing. Do you think this is somehow connected to the blessing he “stole” from his father? The Angel renamed Jacob (“grappler”) as Israel (“one who contends with God”). How might the name “Israel” imply that we might sometimes need to contend with God? (Gen. 32:27-28)
4. After Jacob met with Esau and the two were apparently reconciled, why did Jacob tell his brother that he would later join him in Seir, when he actually went and settled near Shechem (Gen. 33:1-17)? Was Jacob being dishonest? If so, were the brothers *truly* reconciled?
5. Jacob’s daughter Dinah was raped by Hamor (“donkey” in Hebrew), the prince of the city of Shechem. When Jacob learned of this, why did he remain silent (Gen. 34:5)? And was the extreme retaliation against the entire city of Shechem by Simeon and Levi justified? Why should an entire community be faulted for the sins of one (or a few) of its members?
6. On his deathbed, Jacob expressed horror over the violence of Simeon and Levi regarding their killing of the inhabitants of Shechem, and he prophesied that they would be “scattered throughout Israel” (Gen. 49:5-7). However Moses and Aaron later came from Levi, and the Levites became the honored Torah teachers of Israel. What happened to Jacob’s prophecy: “Let not my soul come into their assembly?”
7. After the ordeal of the abduction of Dinah, God commanded Jacob to leave Shechem and return to Bethel to fulfill the vow he had made earlier. Before leaving, however, Jacob commanded the members of his clan to bury all their idols (i.e., “foreign gods”). Why would Jacob’s camp include the presence of these idols? Moreover, why didn’t he destroy these idols but instead only buried them under a tree? (Gen. 35:1-5)
8. At Bethel, God extended the oath of Abraham to Jacob a second time and renamed him “Israel” (Gen. 35:9-15). What connection is there between this event and the Angel of the LORD’s renaming of Jacob found earlier (Gen. 32:27-28)?



9. The portion ends with the genealogy of Esau, otherwise known as Edom, whose descendants became an ongoing enemy of the Jewish people (Gen. 36). Jewish tradition sometimes links Edom with the Roman Empire and therefore regards Hitler as a “child of Rome.” Indeed, post-Holocaust theology has been often been expressed as a “theology of protest.” Why was Hitler given the power to murder so many Jewish lives, including the lives of over a million Jewish children? Why does God allow the wicked to have power in this world, especially when we are taught to pray, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven?”
10. In this portion, Jacob finally arrives home to see his father, but the Torah is silent about their reunion. Shortly afterward Isaac died. What do you think might have been said between the two men? (Gen. 35:27-29)
11. Various Scriptures seem to suggest that “Rachel” is a symbolic mother of the Jewish people. Apart from the story of her death during the birth of Benjamin, however, there is no event mentioned in the Torah that refers to her “weeping for her children,” and therefore it may be supposed that Jeremiah - who wished that both he and his mother had perished on the day of his birth (Jer. 20:14-15) - invoked her memory as the consummate mother of Israel who would share in the sorrow and suffering of her descendants. That Rachel is a symbol of the children of Israel is further supported in Amos 5:15, when the entire nation of Israel is called after the name of her firstborn son. *Discuss.*

For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Vayeshev** (i.e., Genesis 37:1- 40:23)
- Read the Haftarah (Amos 2:6-3:8)
- Read the New Testament (Matt. 1:1-6;16-25)



שַׁבָּת שְׁלוֹמִים

S h a b b a t S h a l o m !