

פרשת וישלח

OVERVIEW

Yaakov prepares to meet his brother Esau by sending a delegation carrying lavish presents. In this way he hopes to pacify him, as he still fears his anger. His nocturnal struggle with a divine messenger earns him his new name: Yisrael. To his great surprise, Esau receives him warmly; the memory of the past seems blotted out. Yaakov declines his brother's suggestion to settle in the area, preferring the land where he used to graze his flock. He settles in Shechem. There, his daughter is defiled by the son of the prince who then asks to marry her. Shimon and Levi pretend to accept his proposal on condition that all male inhabitants of the city would submit to circumcision. After this had been done the brothers came upon the city unawares and killed all the men in revenge for the crime committed against their sister. Yaakov does not approve of their action. - He continues his wandering and reaches Beth-el where Rachel dies while giving birth to a son, Benjamin. From there he leads his flocks to the plains in the south. - Yitzhak dies and is buried by his two sons. A full genealogy of Esau's descendants concludes the Sidrah.

COMMENTARY

Yaakov's Return

Matured through his trials, Yaakov returns to the soil of the Holy Land. Esau was also successful and became a powerful and feared leader. It is important to Yaakov to effect a full reconciliation with his brother in order to finally achieve the peace between them. Yet, the two men who now confront each other represent two different worlds. Yaakov seeks and finds fulfillment in family life inspired by religious ideals. Esau seeks glory at the head of his troops, a man of aggressive action and brutal force.

Twenty years of separation have changed Esau in that he recognizes G-d's protective Hand in helping Yaakov to overcome his numerous trials. But Yaakov

takes nothing for granted. He takes precautionary measures as befitting the responsibility a father feels for the safety of his family. He divides his household and the herd in two camps: "If Esau comes to one camp and strikes it down then the other camp will escape" (32:9). Here Yaakov typifies the Jew who, hardened by his painful experiences, carefully

considers all risks before taking the decisive step. He is fully prepared to resume the ties with his brother. It is this demonstration of good will which disarms Esau and softens his wrath.

The Struggle with the Angel

This episode is one of the most significant in the lives of our ancestors. In the deep of the night Esau's guardian angel attacks Yaakov and attempts to wrestle him to the ground. In an epic struggle Yaakov defies the angel and battles him until the morning dawns, despite a severe injury to his hip. The angel has no choice but to bless Yaakov and, as a sign of Yaakov's victory, he bestows on him the name "Yisrael", prince of G-d. This struggle is the prototype of a struggle that has involved Yaakov's descendants at every phase of their stormy history. At all times Israel will be the target of vicious attacks by the powerful nations of the world. It will suffer deep wounds but it will never succumb to them and ultimately emerge victoriously.

By prohibiting the sinew that was injured during Yaakov's struggle with the angel, Jewish law keeps alive the memory of this epic event that puts an indelible stamp on the history of the Jewish people. This is the source of Israel's unshakeable faith in the victory of the spiritual over the mundane. *(Note: The sinew is commonly identified as the sciatic nerve. This is anatomically incorrect. It describes the general area from which the sinew must be removed. It is general practice not to consume the hind parts of the animal because of the difficulty of completely removing the sinew and all its tiny and widely spread vessels).*

Dinah

As Yaakov's only daughter she enjoys her father's and brothers' special attention. Her despoilment by the young prince of Shechem comes as a terrible shock to them. The ruse the brothers employed in revenging their sister will have serious consequences when Yaakov, at the end of his life, designates those of his twelve sons who will become the leaders of the Jewish nation. Shimon and Levi are excluded from consideration as a result of their headstrong action (see Ch. 49: 5-6). On the other hand, their moral outrage and sense of responsibility towards their family are commendable. They could have easily taken advantage of the potentially valuable "connection" with the ruling power. After all, Yaakov was a stranger, an outsider who would greatly benefit from the goodwill of the country's leaders.

All these considerations do not sway the brothers in their determination to revenge Dinah. They are fully aware of the grave consequences their action could have for the entire tribe - and yet they act. True to Yaakov's description of them ("in their anger they murdered men, having veiled their ox-like strength with their friendliness" - Ch. 49:6) they fall upon the perpetrators with savage fury. - Our text teaches us to guard the honor of our wives and daughters but it also stresses the importance of moderation and respect for human life.

Rachel's Death

Not far from Beit Lechem lies the lonely tomb of our foremother Rachel. She found her final resting place at the side of the road that her descendants were to travel when they had to leave their homes for the harsh exile in Babylonia. Rachel's lonely death does not represent the end of an epoch filled with passion and struggle. The dying mother calls her youngest child Ben-Oni, "son of my sorrow". His father names him Binyamin, son

of my right hand, in memory of her who was his strength and joy. Binyamin, the tender child, and Joseph, endowed with an extraordinary intelligence - they are the precious legacy, tender objects of Yaakov's love as they take their mother's place in their father's heart.

It appears that Rachel's death caused Yaakov to withdraw into himself, thus considerably reducing the authority of the head of the family. This is borne out by the incident involving Reuben and Bilhah (35:22) and also by an increasing split within a family that had been united by its common past.

Genealogy of Esau

With the detailed listing of Esau's extensive offspring, the text underlines the contrast to the fate of Yaakov's descendants who will suffer severe hardships during long centuries. Esau and his tribe live by the sword. Their prosperity - and their notoriety - lie in the very ease with which they brush aside all moral considerations. Yaakov and his sons labor quietly at the realization of the true Kingdom of G-d on which alone rests the future of the world.

Irrespective of their brilliant advancement and easy triumphs, Esau and his like will disappear from the world scene. The text's listing of Esau's numerous descendants, rulers and kings of that period, does not lack a certain irony: what is left of them? Yaakov and his sons lay the foundation for a people that, true to the ideals of its forebears, will bring spiritual liberation to a chaotic world.

First publication in the French Language during WWII in Occupied France as "La Tohra Commentée" © 1945 Marc Breuer. Translated to English by R' Marc (מרדכי) and Jacob Breuer זצ"ל. Missing parts translated from the original French text by Elie Winsbacher. Edited and Published in English with permission of the author's family by Elie Winsbacher . © 2003. Based on the teachings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch זצ"ל. To receive electronically, please send email to: e.w@att.net or download from the website of the Central Organization for Jewish Outreach at <http://www.cojo.net>.