

TORAHSCOPE: VaYishlach (And he sent)

by Mark Huey posted 12 December, 2008 www.outreachisrael.net

Genesis 32:4-36:43
Hosea 11:7 – 12:12

“Jacob’s Seasoning (Part 2)” The Road to Hebron

“Then Jacob sent messengers before him to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom. He also commanded them saying, ‘Thus you shall say to my lord Esau: “Thus says your servant Jacob, I have sojourned with Laban, and stayed until now; and I have oxen and donkeys and flocks and male and female servants; and I have sent to tell my lord, that I may find favor in your sight”’” (Genesis 32:3-5).

While considering last week’s Torah portion entitled, *Vayetze* (And he went), this week’s reading entitled, *Vayishlach* (And he sent), came to mind as an extension of the description of the life of the Patriarch Jacob. For the four chapters of Genesis 28:10-32:3, we followed the life of Jacob for approximately twenty years. If you check the itinerary, Jacob goes from Bethel to Mahanaim during this section. For the next period of Jacob’s life that is covered this week, it takes about five chapters of Genesis (32:4-36:43), with the return trip beginning at Mahanaim and ending at Bethel. During that sojourn, Jacob goes from a young, brash, fleshy, natural man, to a man that in spite of his humanity is growing deeper in his walk with God. In many respects, most of us can identify with what I have labeled “Jacob’s Seasoning” as he moves from the natural to the spiritual. Let’s see what additional seasoning takes place during the next few chapters in his life.

The second part of the two-part story of Jacob’s return to the Promised Land picks up at the traumatic confrontation anticipated by Jacob with his estranged brother Esau. As you will recall, Jacob has just endured his final parting with his father-in-law, Laban. There by the banks of a tributary that flows into the Jabbok River, Jacob experiences the presence of the angels, who have come to minister to him on the next leg of his spiritual journey. He notes the angelic host, but names the place “two camps” rather than “camp of God.”

There seems to be many things going through Jacob’s mind with the two-camp separation from Laban, and then the distinct camps represented by his family and the host of angels. And then it comes to him almost by inspiration as he thinks, “Maybe I can appease my brother Esau by separating my family and belongings into two camps. Perhaps by having my ‘messengers’ or *malakim* (מַלְאָכִים) go before me and address my brother as, ‘my lord,’ maybe he will accept me back into the land where he has been residing” (cf. Genesis 32:4):

“Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed; and he divided the people who were with him, and the flocks and the herds and the camels, into two companies; for he said, ‘If Esau comes to the one company and attacks it, then the company which is left will escape.’ And Jacob said, ‘O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who didst say to me, “Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,” I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant; for with my staff only I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two companies”’” (Genesis 32:7-10).

As you read this account, you can discern the conflict being expressed between Jacob, the natural man, and Jacob, the man who is learning to trust on God. Just read his honest prayer confessing his unworthiness:

“O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who didst say to me, ‘Return to your country and to your relatives, and I will prosper you,’ I am unworthy of all the lovingkindness and of all the faithfulness which You have shown to Your servant” (Genesis 32:8-9).

Finally, it is recorded that Jacob is beginning to understand that he is unworthy, or in more modern-day vernacular: “coming to the end of himself.” You can sense the tension building as he is struggling with a plan to manipulate his brother Esau with all the gifts, and yet a desire to

simply trust in the Lord, for His deliverance. He pleads even further with the Holy One in his prayer of supplication:

“Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me, the mothers with the children. For You did say, ‘I will surely prosper you, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude’” (Genesis 32:11-12).

When you start hearing or reading prayers that request deliverance and protection, you realize that a person is beginning to believe in God and His power—rather than human strength and ability. Jacob even goes back in his memory to remind the Lord about the promises from years before. In other words, Jacob is pulling out all the stops. His needs are finally getting beyond his own ability. And yet, he continues to work his plan to separate his family into two different camps in order to prevent the possibility of losing all to a revengeful Esau.

Jacob’s Wrestling Match

As we read further in our text this week, Jacob implements his plan. He sends the livestock on ahead to appease his brother. Being left with the family, he begins to follow the herds and comes to the Jabbok River crossing. He sends his wives, concubines, and children across the river ford and stays back to spend a night alone contemplating what is going to happen. This is the infamous night that Jacob probably comes to the “end of himself” and realizes that he must trust in the God of Abraham and Isaac. This is the night that he stays up all night wrestling with a man that many commentators conclude is the Messiah Yeshua Himself:

“Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. And when he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he touched the socket of his thigh; so the socket of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated while he wrestled with him. Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the dawn is breaking.’ But he said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’ So he said to him, ‘What is your name?’ And he said, ‘Jacob.’ And he said, ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel; for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.’ Then Jacob asked him and said, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, ‘I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.’ Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh” (Genesis 32:24-31).

Here many conclusions are drawn from this incident where Jacob, the conniver, is finally at the point in his life where he wrestles with God for an entire night holding on until he receives a desired blessing. There was definitely something supernatural about this “man.” He merely “touched” Jacob’s hip and the permanent damage created a life-long limp. Then when the requested blessing finally comes, it comes in the form of Jacob being renamed *Yisrael* (יִשְׂרָאֵל), or “one who struggles with God.” Finally, in his ecstasy from having survived the night, Jacob—who has now been renamed Israel—names the place of the encounter *Penuel* (פְּנִיֵּאֵל), meaning “the face of God.”

As mentioned earlier, all of these events have allowed many commentators from Jewish and Christian perspectives to conclude that Jacob was wrestling with an incarnation of God. After all, He had supernatural strength, He blessed Jacob by renaming him Israel, and Jacob’s testimony that he had seen the face of God are three indications that something very extraordinary occurred at this wrestling match. From this point forward, Jacob/Israel was forever burdened with a limp that would remind him of the episode.

Oddly enough, the plan to send ahead the livestock and split up the different wives, concubines, and children proceeded as conceived. Eventually, we find that Esau’s heart has already been softened toward his brother Jacob:

“But he himself passed on ahead of them and bowed down to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. Then Esau ran to meet him and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept” (Genesis 33:3-4).

Jacob, or Israel, humbles himself before his brother and bows seven times. A weeping brother who appears to be delighted with the reunion meets him. Whether it is the appeasement of gifts or the turning of the heart by a sovereign God, we simply find that Jacob is received back into the company of his estranged brother.

As we read further in the narrative, we discover that although Jacob may have had his cathartic moment with the Holy One, he is still evidencing some remnants of the flesh. The seasoning required to move from a man of the flesh to a spiritual man is not necessarily instantaneous. Instead, it generally happens over a number of years as the trials and tribulations of life are used to have Him relinquish his own strength to the sovereign will of the Almighty.

If you will remember, Jacob was told to “return to the land of his fathers.” Apparently, simply coming across the Jordan River and settling in the Shechem area did not comply with the requirement to return to the land. However, we do discover that Jacob is now far more compliant with the patterns established by his fathers for correctly worshipping God.

Return to Bethel

“And Jacob journeyed to Succoth, and built for himself a house, and made booths for his livestock, therefore the place is named Succoth. **Now Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Paddan-aram, and camped before the city.** And he bought the piece of land where he had pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, Shechem's father, for one hundred pieces of money. **Then he erected there an altar, and called it El-Elohe-Israel**” (Genesis 33:17-20).

Here after settling for a season in Succoth, he finally moves across the Jordan River and up the valley to the land around Shechem. There he purchases a piece of land and settles in with his sons. As this chapter concludes, we discover that Jacob/Israel erects an altar rather than a pillar. Then he names the altar El-Elohe-Israel, meaning God, the God of Israel. It seems that this altar is one that would actually have sacrifices offered upon it. Jacob not only names the altar, but gives it the name of his new name, Israel, that he had received prior to the encounter with Esau and the crossing of the Jordan into Canaan. The spiritual maturation process is slowly taking hold.

But if we follow the story, we will discover that Jacob probably should have continued down the mountain top highway, back to the land of his fathers, further south around Hebron and Beersheba. It is not until after the calamities that befall Jacob and his children in the land around Shechem that the Holy One speaks to him and commands him to move south:

“Then God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.’ So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, **‘Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your garments; and let us arise and go up to Bethel; and I will make an altar there to God, who answered me in the day of my distress, and has been with me wherever I have gone. So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods which they had, and the rings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was near Shechem’**” (Genesis 35:1-4).

Here in this passage we see some clear indications that Jacob was not quite ready for the trip south until after the incidents of Shechem had already occurred. Apparently, he still was allowing the household idols that Rachel and others had absconded from Laban to continue to be in his midst. **Jacob had not cleaned house.** He certainly was moving in the right direction on the road to return, and was growing spiritually by worshipping the Lord at the newly constructed altar in Shechem. But as we can see from the problems that erupted in the Shechem area, there were still some residual problems associated with his fleshly nature. He had stopped in Shechem and began to intermingle with the Shechemites. There is no recorded directive from God for Jacob to settle in the Shechem area. This could have been a potentially devastating situation as the problems with Dinah erupted. Then his sons, led by Simeon and Levi, take advantage of the men of Shechem after they had all agreed to join in with Jacob by performing the circumcision rites that would allow them to identify with Abraham. The carnage was devastating.

As the Scripture indicates, the murder of the Shechemites made Jacob and his family odious in the sight of those in that region:

“Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, **‘You have brought trouble on me, by making me odious among the inhabitants of the land,** among the Canaanites and the Perizzites; and my men being few in number, they will gather together against me and attack me and I shall be destroyed, I and my household” (Genesis 34:30).

Something needed to be done, and this occurs when the Holy One speaks to Jacob and tells him to move to Bethel, where he should build an altar and settle:

“Then God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel, and live there; and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau” (Genesis 35:1).

If you recall, after all these years Jacob is coming full circle. He has been to Paddan-Haran to find his wives and sire his children. Now he has spent a season in Shechem, after finally coming back into the land west of the Jordan. Shechem turns out to be a disaster for him and his family, and now he is commanded by God to return to Bethel. Interestingly, the Holy One protects him on his final trek south to the place where he saw the angels ascending and descending on the ladder:

“As they journeyed, there was a great terror upon the cities which were around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob. So Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. **And he built an altar there, and called the place El-bethel, because there God had revealed Himself to him, when he fled from his brother...** Then God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and He blessed him. And God said to him, **‘Your name is Jacob; You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.’ Thus He called him Israel.** God also said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come forth from you. And the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you. **Then God went up from him in the place where He had spoken with him. And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a pillar of stone, and he poured out a libation on it; he also poured oil on it. So Jacob named the place where God had spoken with him, Bethel”** (Genesis 35:5-7, 9-15).

This is an interesting passage that continues to show us that Jacob/Israel is maturing in his role as the inheritor of the blessings that were first bestowed upon Abraham and Isaac. Here as he returns to Bethel, God reiterates the renaming that took place during the wrestling match at Mahanaim. After confirming that his name is Israel, God further describes many of the elements of the Abrahamic Covenant regarding posterity and the land promised. As this encounter with God concludes and He departs, Jacob sets up a pillar of stone. Then he continues to introduce spiritual exercises by pouring a libation on it, and anointing it with oil. This is a similar procedure that occurred many years before as he was departing the land (Genesis 28:18). The libation is a new procedure that is first introduced here in the Scriptures. The next time we find it being described is when Moses is telling the people of Israel about the morning and evening sacrifices:

“Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two one year old lambs each day, continuously. **‘The one lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight;** and there shall be one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of beaten oil, and one-fourth of a hin of wine for a **libation** with one lamb” (Exodus 29:38-40).

Is it possible that on his spiritual journey, Jacob is slowly learning more of the proper techniques to properly worship the God of Abraham and Isaac?

Certainly, we are observing Jacob come full circle from Bethel to Paddan-Haran and back to Bethel—from a fleshly young man to now a maturing father of eleven sons and a daughter. But as all who have been on a spiritual journey to maturity can attest, the trials of life continue throughout our lives to develop a godly character in us.

Just after this time at Bethel, Jacob continues on with his family down the road toward Hebron:

“Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when there was still some distance to go to Ephrath, **Rachel began to give birth and she suffered severe labor.** And it came about when she was in severe labor that the midwife said to her, ‘Do not fear, for now you have another son.’ And it came about as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. **So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).** And Jacob set up a pillar over her grave; that is the pillar of Rachel's grave to this day. Then Israel journeyed on and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder. And it came about while Israel was dwelling in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it” (Genesis 35:16-22).

It is at this time that Jacob endures the loss of his beloved Rachel on the road to Hebron. Losing the “love of his life” no doubt was another step in the maturation process for Israel. Interestingly, “Jacob” puts up a pillar to commemorate the place where Rachel was buried. And then “Israel” pitches his tent by the tower of Eder (near Bethlehem). The text seems to be bouncing back and forth between naming Jacob, “Jacob,” and then followed by “Israel.” **Is this a subtle way that the Scriptures are showing us that Jacob/Israel is still struggling with his two natures?** We read a little further and discover that it is while they are living near the tower of Eder, that Reuben has sexual relations with his father's concubine. And then we see that “Israel” finds out about it. We know from further on that this act has serious consequences for Reuben, who in fact, loses his birthright privileges:

“Reuben, you are my firstborn; my might and the beginning of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. Uncontrolled as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father's bed; then you defiled *it*—he went up to my couch” (Genesis 49:3-4).

Finally, it seems that Jacob makes it back to the tents of his father Isaac near Hebron. It is here that his journey, for this part of his life, comes to a conclusion:

“And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre of Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. And Isaac breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people, an old man of ripe age; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him” (Genesis 35:27-29).

Back in Hebron, Jacob/Israel takes up residence with his aging father Isaac. At the ripe old age of 180, Isaac dies, and interestingly, Esau and Jacob both bury him. At that point, they would have both been 120 years old. And then, at some point in time after the burial, Esau does a remarkable thing. Instead of staying in the Hebron area with his growing family, he moves to the southeast and takes up residence in the area that comes to be known as Edom:

“Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob. For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock. So Esau lived in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom” (Genesis 36:6-8).

Here we see God fulfilling His word to Jacob/Israel as his brother Esau seems to voluntarily move his family and livestock to the region known as Edom. As this portion ends, we find that Jacob is finally settled in the area that has been promised to him and his descendants. His father Isaac has died. His brother Esau has moved away. And now Jacob takes up his promised position as the spiritual head of the family that will ultimately become the nation of Israel.

Our Seasoning

All along the way, we can witness that Jacob is continually being “seasoned” by the trials and tribulations of life. In many respects, he is modeling for those who will follow him, a life that most can identify with when they consider their own personal journeys. Jacob epitomizes the struggle that we all have with God at one point or another in our lives as we often operate with two natures that struggle within all who seek to worship Him.

It is encouraging to read that Jacob was ultimately known as a man of faith. Even after all of his conniving and struggles that he had throughout his life, when the author of Hebrews lists great figures of faith, Jacob is listed among them:

“By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff” (Hebrews 11:21).

Here after Jacob has been seasoned into Israel, he is remembered for eternity for his faith to bless the sons of Joseph and **worshiped by leaning on the top of his staff**. May we all finish this life and have a testimony of faith, being known as those who to our dying day worshipped the Holy One with our last breath. Then we, like Jacob who became Israel, will know that our own “personal seasoning” has had its perfect work in our life.

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