

The parashah in outline

I. HEADING HOME

Confrontation and Reconciliation (32:4-33:20)

- A. Jacob sets out to meet Esau (32:4-16)
- B. Jacob struggles with a “man” in the dark of night (32:17-33)
- C. The brothers reconcile (33:1-20)

II. DINAH AND SHECHEM

Sex and Social Status (34:1-31)

- A. Rape? (verses 1-4)
- B. Brothers’ interpretation: An outrage against Israel (verses 5-24)
- C. Brothers’ revenge (verses 25-31)

III. ISRAEL AND B’NAI YISRAEL

Covenant Renewal, Death, and Life (35:1-36:43)

- A. Beth-El and the renaming of Jacob (35:1-15)
- B. Rachel’s second son and her death (35:16-21)
- C. Jacob’s wives and children (35:22-26)
- D. Isaac’s death (35:27-29)
- E. The line of Esau (36:1-43)

Looking ahead at Vayishlach, from women's perspective

Adapted from The Torah, A Woman's Commentary

Parashat Vayishlach ("And he sent") features Jacob—the third and final patriarch—as he becomes the last individual to receive a personal covenant with God. Even before birth, Jacob was portrayed as a character who struggles. He struggled in the womb. He struggled with Esau for birthright and blessing. After 20 years of living in Aram, he struggled with Lavan, and, ever since he has headed back toward the land of Canaan, he has been facing a potentially dangerous encounter with his estranged brother Esau.

In a life-transforming event, Jacob is also involved in a nocturnal struggle and his name is changed to "Israel," which may reflect his own struggles with God [and with his own character]. After Jacob, all future covenant renewals will be made between God and B'nai Yisrael (literally "the children 'of [the patriarch] Israel")—the Israelites as a whole, who will continue the struggle.

All of the women in this parashah (except for those in the genealogy of Esau in Genesis 36) are members of Jacob's immediate family. What stands out is the troubling story of Dinah and Shechem (Genesis 34), although Dinah's role in the narrative is revealingly minor. While she functions as a trigger for the event, the tale focuses on the relations between the men of the family of Jacob and the Canaanites among whom they have settled. The major concern in the story as told is not the personal fate of an individual woman (or man), but the political relationship between Israel and the other inhabitants in the land. Dinah becomes a symbol in the exploration of the theme of identity—of self and of other—that began with the story of Abraham.

The other women in Jacob's household appear in passing in this parashah, with Rachel's death as a poignant conclusion. In general, these passages enable us to view the women in the story as intermediaries linking together groups of men, while moving about in the social world of the male characters—who have the authority to represent both the women and the subordinate men in their households.

Parashat Vayishlach (Genesis 32.4-36.43)

Chapter 32

4 And Jacob sent messengers ahead of him to Esau, his brother, to the land of Seir, the territory of Edom, 5 and commanded them saying, “You shall say this: ‘To my lord, to Esau, your servant Jacob said this, “I’ve stayed with Lavan and delayed until now, 6 and ox and ass and sheep and male and female servant [servant and maid—EF] have become mine. And I’m sending to tell my lord so as to find favor in your eyes.

7 And the messengers came back to Jacob saying, “We came to your brother, to Esau, and also he’s coming to you—and 400 men with him.” 8 And Jacob was very afraid, and he had anguish [and was distressed—RA, EF; was greatly frightened—JPS; was terrified—CS]. And he divided the people who were with him and the sheep and the oxen and the camels into two camps. 9 And he said, “If Esau will come to one camp and strike it, then the camp that is left will survive [will escape—RA, CS, EF].”

10 And Jacob said, “God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, Adonai, who said to me, ‘Go back to your land and to your birthplace, and I’ll deal well with you; 11 I’m not worthy of [Too small am I for—EF] all the kindnesses and all the faithfulness that you’ve done with your servant, because I crossed this Jordan with just my rod, and now I’ve become two camps. 12 save me from my brother’s hand, from Esau’s hand, because I fear him, in case he’ll come and strike me, mother with [falling on—CS] children. 13 And you’ve said, ‘I’ll do well with you, and I’ll make your seed like the sand of the sea, that it won’t be countable because of its great number.’”

14 And he spent that night there.

And he took an offering for Esau, his brother, from what had come into his hand: 15 200 she-goats and 20 he-goats, 200 ewes and 20 rams, 16 30 nursing camels and their offspring, 40 cows and 10 bulls, 20 she-asses and 10 he-asses. 17 And he placed them in his servants’ hands, each herd by itself, and he said to his servants, “Pass on in front of me, and keep a distance between each herd and the next.” 18 And he commanded the first, saying, “When my brother, Esau, meets you and asks you, saying, ‘To whom do you belong, and where are you going, and to whom do these in front of you belong?’ 19 then you’ll say, ‘To your servant, to Jacob. It’s an offering sent to my lord, to Esau. And here he is behind us as well.’”

NOTE: The main translation for this parashah is the one done by Richard Elliott Friedman.

POINTS TO PONDER:

1. Why send messengers, which is rather impersonal, rather than Jacob going by himself, since he’s the one who needs to apologize? Or is he the only one who needs to do so?

2. Note how Jacob begins his prayer in verse 10 (the first true prayer in the Torah, by the way). What is significant about it? (Hint: Compare this to how God announces Himself to Jacob in the dream at Beth-El.)

Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

EF: Everett Fox REF: Richard Elliott Friedman RA: Robert Alter NS: Nahum Sarna CS: Chaim Stern
SRH: Samson Raphael Hirsch RASHI: Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak OJPS: Old Jewish Publication Society version
WGP: W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* TWC: *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*

20 And he also commanded the second, also the third, also all of those who were going behind the herds, saying, “You’ll speak this way to Esau when you find him, 21 and you’ll say, ‘Here is your servant, Jacob, behind us as well.’” Because he said, “Let me appease [I will wipe (the anger) from—EF] his face with the offering that’s going in front of me, and after that I’ll see his face; maybe he’ll raise my face” [For he reasoned, “I will win him over with an offering in advance, then, when I face him, he may pardon me”—CS]. 22 And the offering passed ahead of him. And he spent that night in the camp.

23 And he got up in that night and took his two wives and his two maids [slavegirls—RA] and his 11 boys and crossed the Jabbok ford. 24 And he took them and had them cross the wadi, and he had everything that was his cross.

25 And Jacob was left by himself. And a man wrestled with him until the dawn’s rising. 26 And he saw that he was not able against him, and he touched [wrenched—JPS] the inside [hip-socket—RA, CS; the socket—JPS, EF] of his thigh, and the inside [hip-socket—RA, CS; the socket—JPS, EF] of Jacob’s thigh was dislocated [strained—JPS] during his wrestling with him. 27 And he said, “Let me go, because the dawn has risen.” And he said, “I won’t let you go unless you bless me.”

28 And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”

29 And he said, “Your name won’t be said ‘Jacob’ anymore, but ‘Israel’ because you’ve struggled with God and with people and were able.” [Not as Yaakov/Heel-Sneak shall your name be henceforth uttered, but rather as Yisrael/God-Fighter—EF]

30 And Jacob asked, and he said, “Tell your name.” And he said, “Why is this that you ask my name?” And he blessed him there.

31 And Jacob called the place’s name Peni-El, “because I’ve seen God face-to-face, and my life has been delivered.”

32 And the sun rose on him as he passed Penuel, and he was faltering on his thigh. 33 On account of this the children of Israel to this day will not eat the tendon of the vein that is on the inside of the thigh, because he touched the inside of Jacob’s thigh, the tendon of the vein.

Chapter 33

1 And Jacob raised his eyes and looked, and here was Esau coming, and 400 men with him. And he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids; 2 and he placed the maids and their children first, and Leah and her children following, and Rachel and Joseph following, 3 and he passed in front of them. And he bowed to the ground seven times until he came up to his brother. 4 And Esau ran to him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him. And they wept.

3. What is Jacob trying to accomplish by such a lavish gift?

4. Who was that “stranger in the night” Jacob wrestled with, and what makes you think that?

5. What does the reconciliation scene say about Esau, and how does this scene contrast to the way Lavan greeted Jacob at the well that first time?

5 And he raised his eyes and saw the women and the children, and he said, “Who are these whom you have?” And he said, “The children with whom God has graced your servant.”

6 And the maids came over, they and their children, and bowed. 7 And Leah and her children, too, came over, and they bowed. And then Joseph and Rachel came over, and they bowed.

8 And he said, “Who is all this camp of yours that I met?” And he said, “To find favor in my lord’s eyes.” 9 And Esau said, “I have a great deal, my brother. Let what’s yours be yours.” 10 And Jacob said, “Don’t. If I’ve found favor in your eyes, then you’ll take my offering from my hand, because on account of this I’ve seen your face—like seeing God’s face!—and you’ve accepted me. 11 Take my blessing that’s been brought to you, because God has been gracious to me and because I have everything.” And he pressed him, and he took it.

12 And he said, “Let’s travel, and let’s go. And let me go alongside you.”

13 And he said to him, “My lord knows that the children are weak and the nursing sheep and oxen are with me, and they’ll drive them one day and all the sheep will die. 14 Let my lord pass on in front of his servant; and I, let me move along at my pace required by the task that’s before me and required by the children until I come to my lord at Seir.”

15 And Esau said, “Let me set with you some of the people who are with me.” And he said, “Why have I found favor in my lord’s eyes?” [“Oh, no, my lord is too kind to me”—JPS; “For what reason? May I only find favor in my lord’s eyes—EF]

16 And Esau went back on his way to Seir that day, 17 and Jacob traveled to Sukkot. And he built a house for himself and made booths for his cattle. On account of this he called the place’s name Sukkot. 18 And Jacob came, safe, to the city of Shechem, which was in the land of Canaan, when he was coming from Paddan Aram, and camped in front of the city. 19 And he bought the section of field which he pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, father of Shechem, for a hundred qesita. 20 And he set up an altar there, and called it “El, God of Israel.”

Chapter 34

1 And Dinah, Leah’s daughter, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land. 2 And Shechem, son of Hamor, the Hivite, the chieftain of the land, saw her. And he took her and lay with her and degraded her [abused her—RA; raped her—CS; forcing her—EF]. 3 And his soul clung to [was captivated by—CS] Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, and he loved the girl and spoke on the girl’s heart [spoke tenderly to her—CS].

6. What reason may Esau have for wanting to send men with Jacob—and why would Jacob not want that extra protection being offered? How does Esau’s departure effect your answer?

7. Jacob says he needs to travel slowly because of the size of his camp, so it will take a few more days to get to Seir to visit with Esau. Is he being truthful or is “the deceiver” still part of Jacob’s character?

8. Does a rapist fall in love with his victim, or is there more to this story?

4 And Shechem said to Hamor, his father, "Get me this girl for a wife."
 5 And Jacob heard that he had defiled Dinah, his daughter; and his sons were with his cattle in the field, and Jacob kept quiet until they came. 6 And Hamor, Shechem's father, went out to Jacob to speak with him. 7 And Jacob's sons came from the field when they heard, and the men were pained, and they were very furious, for he had done a foolhardy [a scurrilous—RA] thing among [committed and outrage against—JPS, CS] Israel, to lie with Jacob's daughter, and such a thing is not done. 8 And Hamor spoke with them, saying, "Shechem, my son, his soul [his very self—RA] longs for [his emotions are so attached to—EF] your daughter. Give her to him as a wife,
 9 and marry with us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters to you, 10 and live with us; and the land will be before you: live and go around in it and take possession in it."
 11 And Shechem said to her father and to her brothers, "Let me find favor in your eyes, and I'll give whatever you say to me. 12 Make a bride-price and gift on me very great, and let me give whatever you say to me, and give me the girl as a wife."
 13 And Jacob's sons answered Shechem and Hamor, his father, with deception [with guile—JPS] as they spoke because he had defiled Dinah, their sister. 14 And they said to them, "We aren't able to do this thing, to give our sister to a man who has a foreskin, because that's a disgrace to us. 15 only this way will we consent to you: if you'll be like us, every male among you to be circumcised. 16 And we'll give our daughters to you and take your daughters to us, and we'll live with you, and we'll become one people. 17 And if you won't listen to us, to be circumcised, then we'll take our daughter and go."
 18 And their words were good in Hamor's eyes and in Hamor's son Shechem's eyes. 19 And the boy did not delay to do the thing, for he desired Jacob's daughter. And he was more [most—JPS] respected [more highly regarded—RA] than all [He carried more weight than anyone in—EF] his father's house. 20 And Hamor and his son Shechem came to the gate of their city and spoke to the people of their city, saying, 21 "These people are peaceable with us, and they'll live in the land and go around in it, and the land, here, has enough breadth for them. Let's take their daughters for us as wives and give our daughters to them. 22 Only in this way will these people consent to us to live with us, to be one people: if every male among us is circumcised as they are circumcised. 23 Their cattle and possessions and all their animals: won't they be ours? Only let's consent to them, and they'll live with us."

9. Keep in mind Jacob's silence over what happened. We'll get back to it.

10. Dinah's brothers speak up, but Jacob offers no comment of his own. Does that mean that the brothers are correct in what they're saying (as opposed to what their intent might be)?

²⁴ And everyone who went out of the gate of his city listened to Hamor and to his son Shechem; and every male, everyone who went out of the gate of his city, was circumcised.

²⁵ And it was on the third day, when they were hurting, and two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took his sword, and they came upon the city stealthily, and they killed every male. ²⁶ And they killed Hamor and his son Shechem by the sword and took Dinah from Shechem's house and went out. ²⁷ Jacob's sons had come upon the corpses and despoiled the city because they had defiled their sister. ²⁸ They took their sheep and their oxen and their asses and what was in the city and what was in the field. ²⁹ And they captured and despoiled all their wealth and all their infants and their wives and everything that was in the house.

³⁰ And Jacob said to Simeon and to Levi, "You've caused me anguish, making me odious to those who live in the land, to the Canaanite and to the Perizzite, and I'm few in number, and they'll be gathered against me and strike me, and I'll be destroyed, I and my house."

³¹ And they said, "Shall he treat our sister like a prostitute [a whore—RA, CS, EF]?"

Chapter 35

¹ And God said to Jacob, "Get up. Go up to Beth-El and live there and make an altar there to God, who appeared to you when you were fleeing from Esau, your brother."

² And Jacob said to his house and to everyone who was with him, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you and be purified and change your clothes; ³ and let's get up and go up to Beth-El and I'll make an altar there to God, who answered me in a day of my trouble, and He was with me in the way that I went." ⁴ And they gave all the foreign gods that were in their hand and the rings that were in their ears to Jacob, and Jacob stashed [concealed—EF; hid—CS] them under the oak that was by Shechem. ⁵ And they traveled, and God's terror was on the cities that were around them, and they did not pursue the children of Jacob. ⁶ And Jacob came to Luz, which is in the land of Canaan—it is Beth-El—he and all the people who were with him. ⁷ And he built an altar there and called the place El of Beth-El because God was revealed to him there when he was fleeing from his brother.

⁸ And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died and was buried beneath Beth-El, beneath an oak, and he called its name Oak of Weeping.

11. What surprise might be in store for Jacob when he instructs his camp before setting out for Beth-El?

12. What is the significance of being told that Rebekah's nurse dies—and by the way, what's she doing here in the first place?

9 And God appeared to Jacob again when he was coming from Paddan Aram, and He blessed him. 10 And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob. Your name will not be called Jacob anymore, but rather Israel will be your name.” And He called his name Israel. 11 And God said to him, “I am El Shadday. Be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a community of nations will be from you, and kings will come out from your hips. 12 And the land that I gave to Abraham and to Isaac: I’ll give it to you, and I’ll give the land to your seed after you.” 13 And God went up from on him in the place where He had spoken with him. 14 And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where He had spoken with him, a stone pillar, and he poured a libation on it and spilled oil on it. 15 And Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken to him there Beth-El.

16 And they traveled from Beth-El, and there was still the span of the land to come to Efrat, and Rachel gave birth, and she had difficulty in her labor. 17 And it was when she was having difficulty in her labor, and the midwife said to her, “Don’t be afraid, because this, too, is a son for you.” 18 And it was as her soul was going out—because she died—and she called his name Ben-oni [Son-of-my-woe—EF; son of my suffering—JPS]. And his father called him Benjamin [Son-of-the-right-hand—EF]. 19 And Rachel died. And she was buried on the road to Efrat. It is Bethlehem. 20 And Jacob set up a pillar on her grave. It is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day.

21 And Israel traveled and pitched his tent past Migdal-Eder. 22 And it was when Israel was tenting in that land: and Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father’s concubine. And Israel heard.

And Jacob’s sons were 12. 23 The sons of Jacob were Jacob’s firstborn, Reuben, and Simeon, and Levi and Judah and Issachar and Zebulun. 24 The sons of Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin. 25 And the sons of Bilhah, Rachel’s maid, were Dan and Naftali. 26 And the sons of Zilpah, Leah’s maid, were Gad and Asher. These were Jacob’s sons, who were born to him in Paddan Aram.

27 And Jacob came to Isaac, his father, at Mamre, at Kiryat Arba—it is Hebron—where Abraham and Isaac had resided.

28 And Isaac’s days were a hundred years and eighty years, 29 and Isaac expired. And he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of [satisfied in—EF] days. And Esau and Jacob, his sons, buried him.

13. Why did Jacob change the child’s name from the one Rachel gave him?

Chapter 36

1 And these are the records of Esau: He is Edom. 2 Esau had taken his wives from the daughters of Canaan: Adah, daughter of Elon, the Hittite, and Aholibamah, daughter of Anah, daughter of Zibeon, the Hivite, 3 and Basemath, daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebaioth. 4 And Adah gave birth for Esau to Elifaz, and Basemath gave birth to Reuel, 5 and Aholibamah gave birth to Yeush and Yalam and Korach. These are Esau's sons, who were born to him in the land of Canaan. 6 And Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all the persons of his household and his cattle and all of his animals and all of his possessions that he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and he went to a land, from the presence of Jacob, his brother, 7 because their property was too great for them to live together, and the land of their residences was not able to suffice them because of their cattle. 8 And Esau lived in Mount Seir. Esau: he is Edom.

9 And these are the records of Esau, father of Edom, in Mount Seir. 10 These are the names of Esau's sons: Elifaz, son of Adah, Esau's wife; Reuel, son of Basemath, Esau's wife. 11 And Elifaz's sons were Teman, Omar, Zepho, and Gatam and Kenaz. 12 And Timna had been a concubine of Elifaz, son of Esau, and she gave birth to Amalek for Elifaz. These are the sons of Adah, Esau's wife. 13 And these are the sons of Reuel: Nachat and Zerach, Shammah and Mizzeh. These were the sons of Basemath, Esau's wife. 14 And these were the sons of Aholibamah, daughter of Anah, daughter of Zibeon, Esau's wife: and she gave birth for Esau to Yeush and Yalam and Korach.

15 These are the chiefs of the children of Esau: the sons of Elifaz, Esau's firstborn: chief Teman, chief Omar, chief Zepho, chief Kenaz, 16 chief Korach, chief Gatam, chief Amalek. These are the chiefs of Elifaz in the land of Edom. These are the sons of Adah. 17 And these are the sons of Reuel, son of Esau: chief Nachat, chief Zerah, chief Shammah, chief Mizzah. These are the chiefs of Reuel in the land of Edom. These are the sons of Basemath, Esau's wife. 18 And these are the sons of Aholibamah, Esau's wife: chief Yeush, chief Yalam, chief Korach. These were the chiefs of Aholibamah, daughter of Anah, Esau's wife. 19 These are the sons of Esau, and these are their chiefs. That is Edom.

20 These are the sons of Seir the Horite, who live in the land: Lotan and Shobal and Zibeon and Anah 21 and Dishon and Ezer and Dishan. These are the chiefs of the Horites, the children of Seir, in the land of Edom. 22 And the children of Lotan are Hori and Hemam, and Lotan's sister is Timna. 23 And these are the children of Shobal: Alvan and Manahath and Ebal, Shepho and Onam. 24 And these are the children

14. Why in the world do we need all this information about Esau? This is our story, not his.

of Zibeon: Ayah and Anah—that is Anah who found the water in the wilderness when he tended the asses of Zibeon, his father. ²⁵ And these are the children of Anah: Dishon and Aholibamah, daughter of Anah. ²⁶ And these are the children of Dishon: Hemdan and Eshban and Itran and Kh'ran. ²⁷ These are the children of Ezer: Bilhan and Zaavan and Akan. ²⁸ These are the children of Dishan: Uz and Aran. ²⁹ These are the chiefs of the Horites: chief Lotan, chief Shobal, chief Zibeon, chief Anah, ³⁰ chief Dishon, chief Ezer, chief Dishan. These are the chiefs of the Horites by their chiefdoms in the land of Seir.

³¹ And these are the kings who ruled in the land of Edom before a king ruled the children of Israel. ³² And Bela son of Beor ruled in Edom, and the name of his city was Dinhavah. ³³ And Bela died, and Yovav son of Zerah from Botzrah ruled in his place. ³⁴ And Yovav died, and Husham of the land of Temani ruled in his place.

³⁵ And Husham died, and Hadad son of Bedad, who struck Midian in the field of Moab, ruled in his place, and the name of his city was Avit.

³⁶ And Hadad died, and Samlah of Masrekah ruled in his place. ³⁷ And Samlah died, and Shaul of Rechovot on the river ruled in his place. ³⁸ And Shaul died, and Baal-chanan son of Achbor ruled in his place. ³⁹ And Baal-chanan son of Achbor died, and Hadar ruled in his place, and the name of his city was Pa-u; and his wife's name was Mehetabel daughter of Matred daughter of Mei-zahav.

⁴⁰ And these are the names of the chiefs of Esau by their families, by their places, by their names: chief Timnah, chief Alvah, chief Y'etet, ⁴¹ chief Aholibamah, chief Elah, chief Pinon, ⁴² chief Kenaz. chief Teman, chief Mivtzar, ⁴³ chief Magdiel, chief Iram. These are the chiefs of Edom by their homes in the land of their possession. That is Esau, father of Edom.

