

PARASHAH THIRTY-THREE

Genesis 35:9–36:43; Isaiah 43:1–7; Matthew 11:25–30

notes by Tim Hegg

Re-affirming the Covenant

In this *parashah*, God's covenant promise to Abraham, which was renewed to Isaac, is here passed to Jacob. And as we have come to expect, the renewal and maintenance of the covenant is initiated by God, not man. God speaks to Jacob, then God appears to him (Gen 35:1, 9). God is the One seeking man, and not *visa versa*. Yet, clearly Jacob responds. God calls, and Jacob obeys. Abraham Heschel has put it this way:

Faith comes out of awe, out of an awareness that we are exposed to His presence, out of anxiety to answer the challenge of God, out of an awareness of our being called upon. Religion consists of *God's question and man's answer*. The way to faith is the way of faith. The way to God is a way of God. Unless God asks the question, all our inquiries are in vain. (*God in Search of Man*, p. 137)

Clearly, the most obvious point of the Genesis record is that God is working His plan according to His designs, and He will not be thwarted. Furthermore, what seems to be emphasized the most within this broad theme is that even the sinfulness of God's chosen people will not overturn the promise of the covenant. In the present text, the renewal of the covenant follows two glaring “black marks” upon the sons of Jacob: (1) they neglect justice in favor of revenge and murder a community of people, and (2) they are described as idolaters. If idolatry is the zenith of debauchery in light of the first tablet of the Ten Words, murder fills the same role for the second half of the decalogue. In short, the descendants of Jacob are viewed in our text as breaking the Torah completely—yet He renews the covenant to Jacob and promises it to his descendants (Gen. 35:12).

What is the point? That God can overlook sin? That somehow when it comes to His chosen ones, He requires less than holiness? Hardly! Rather, the continual faithfulness of God to His covenant promises points out a truth most simple yet glorious: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a God full of mercy, compassion, and loving kindness Who makes it His business to take sinners and bring them into His family. In our narrative, God is remaking Jacob—changing him from the inside out. The deceiver and supplanter is becoming upright in character through God's faithful work.

This work of God in the life of Jacob is signalled by the *changing of his name*. Before we get “hung up” on the meaning of the name, we should ponder the significance of changing a name in the first place. Names are given to infants. Thus, to give a name to an adult is to emphasize *a new beginning*. Jacob had, by all rights, stolen the birthright of his brother Esau. As such, he could claim no godly right to the covenant promises (even if he could claim some sort of cultural right). God's grace cannot be earned, bought, stolen, or coerced. Jacob was running—running away from the Land, the central symbol of the covenant, and could not, therefore, be the one by whom the promise would be established. This is why God's first directive to Jacob is “Arise, go to Bethel, and live there.” God had chosen Jacob freely, without reference to his deeds (whether good or bad). And thus, to mark the Divine act of election, Jacob is given a new name—a new beginning. He

is now the one through whom the covenant will continue, but by God's choosing, not by his own cunning and deception.

The Divine monergism in this renaming is emphasized in the Hebrew by the resumptive, last line of v. 10—“Thus He called him Israel.” This seemingly redundant line functions to stress the one-sidedness of the naming ceremony. God did it all.

The same is true in the life of every believer. When our names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, the name that is written is one which befits what God intends to make us. He sees the beginning from the end, and knows that He will conform us to the very image of His Son, Yeshua. We are becoming what our name, written there, portrays. God, through His Spirit, is making us into what He has determined we should be. “He Who has begun a good work in us will complete it with a view to the coming day of Messiah Yeshua” (Philippians 1:6).

The meaning of the name “Israel” has attracted a great deal of study by the Sages and scholars of by-gone eras. This is because the name “Israel” is not so simple to decipher. In Gen 32:28[Hebrew, v. 29] an explanation is given for the name “Israel”: “. . . for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” This presupposes the Hebrew verb שָׁרָה, *sarah*, “to strive.” Yet this is an obscure root, found only here, though some emend the text to read it in Hosea 12:4-5:

4 Yes, he wrestled (וַיִּשָׁר, *vayasar*) with the angel and prevailed; He wept and sought His favor. He found Him at Bethel and there He spoke with us, 5 Even Adonai (יהוה), the God of hosts (אֱלֹהֵי הַצְּבָאוֹת), Adonai (יהוה) is His memorial Name.

The verb “wrestled” is apparently from the root שָׁרָה, *sur*, taken as a by-form of שָׁרָה. Yet the exact derivation is speculative. Still, the prophet Hosea is clearly referring to the Genesis narrative, and the event that resulted in Jacob's name being changed to Israel. Note as well that the Almighty's confrontation with Jacob is viewed as affecting all of Israel: “He spoke with us.” And the renewal of the covenant, stressed in the changing of Jacob's name to Israel, is founded upon the Name of God Himself, as emphasized in v. 5—it was יהוה Who appeared to and spoke with Jacob. Moreover, the fact that the verb “to wrestle” is obscure adds credence to the explanation that the name “Israel” is dealing with the sovereign action of God. If the meaning of the name was something later explained by folk-etymology, we would expect a far more common root to be employed.

Furthermore, in names compounded with Hebrew אֵל, *El*, (God), He is most often the subject of the action. Note, for example, יִשְׁמַעֵאל, *Yishmael*, “God has heard,” מַלְכֵיֵאל, *Malkiel*, “God is my king,” etc. Thus, following this line of reasoning, the name Israel would mean “God strives” = “God is striving to accomplish His will.”

Ramban, along with other Sages, suggested that there was a connection between the meanings of “Israel” and the poetic “Yeshurun” (cf. Deut 32:15; 33:15, 26; Is 44:2). The Hebrew יָשָׁר, *yashar*, means “upright” and stands in contrast to “Jacob” (=“deceiver, supplanter”). Since the early stages of Hebrew did not differentiate between the letter *seen* (“s”) and the letter *sheen* (“sh”), the suggestion has been made that the name Israel could be equivalent to “Ishrael”, and thus mean “Upright of God” (in contrast to the former Jacob=supplanter, deceiver).

Still others, like Rashi, appear to take the Hebrew שָׂר, *sar*, “prince” as the basis for the name Israel. Rashi says the name denotes one who is a “prince and ruler.” If this is so, the name would mean “he will be a prince of God” or “God will rule.”

There is not enough evidence to be dogmatic on the meaning of the name “Israel.” However,

it seems very possible that the ambiguity was intended, so that both the idea of “wrestling” and of being a “prince” are combined. Jacob would become the means through which God would extend His rule upon the earth, and this would come about as God transformed Jacob from being a supplanter to being a prince, one who walked in uprightness and integrity before God.

Note that in our text (Genesis 35:11) God identifies Himself as אֱלֹהֵי שָׂדָי, *El Shaddai*, a Name which has become connected in the Genesis narrative with the giving of children. The covenant promises, passed on from generation to generation, are dependent upon the giving of children, and our *parashah* records the birth of Benjamin, from whose loins would come the first king of Israel.

Indeed, the immediate response of Jacob after God specifically recounts the renewal of the covenant promises to him, is to engage in an act of worship. He sets up a pillar, pours out a drink offering upon it, and anoints it with oil. Then he calls the name of the place “Bethel,” or “house of God.” This, of course, repeats almost exactly what he did previously (28:18, 19) when God appeared to him and promised the covenant blessings.

This time, however, Jacob adds a “drink offering”. The Hebrew term for “pour out,” and for a “drink offering” is נָסַח/נִסְחָ, *nasach/nesech*, and in Genesis is found only here. Usually it consists of wine being poured out (cf. 2 Ki 16:13). What does it symbolize? Wine is a symbol of joy and happiness. In a libation offering, the worshipper is pouring out the symbol of joy as an act of worship. Put simply, the ritual means “I willingly give to you, O God, all that makes me joyful.” How easy it is to hoard our “wine” and to think that it is too costly to be poured out. Clearly one of the greatest examples of a “libation” was the costly perfume poured out upon the feet of Messiah, prefiguring His own “pouring out of His soul.”

The actions of Jacob in his ceremony of worship signal a change: whereas before he was willing to stoop to less than righteous means to gain what he wanted, here we see him pouring out his joy before the Lord. True worship is a resignation to God of all our hopes and dreams—all that we strive for in terms of joy and happiness. In short, we confess in our worship that God alone is the source of joy, and that we have committed ourselves, yes, resigned ourselves, to God as the One from Whom true happiness and fulfilment comes.

But God's covenant promises, and even our resignation to Him as the source of all our hopes, is no guarantee for comfort in this world. “I know you chose us—but couldn't you choose someone else just once?!?”—so the restless Tevya muses in the classic “Fiddler on the Roof.” God chose Jacob to be the one through whom the covenant would continue, but this did not guarantee a life of roses. His life is marked by death and sorrow at almost every turn. Here, God speaks to him— even appears to him! What a joy, what a privilege, what a gift! Yet what follows is not the mountain-top experience so much sought after by our modern “play-church” society. What follows for Jacob is the stark reminder of life on a fallen planet. Birth issues in death.

Rachel, the apple of Jacob's eye, the one for whom he served with delight, the one so desperate to bear him children—succumbs to death as her wish for a son is granted. God had promised kings to Jacob, and indeed, the first king would be Shaul, a Benjamite. This “son of sorrow/son of the right hand” would head the clan from which Israel's first monarch would arise. How mysterious are the ways of God, and His wisdom past finding out!

But we might immediately ask: “Where's the justice?” Our Torah section ends with the long listing of Esau's clan. For historians this section contains much fruitful data, but for the average reader, it is just a long list! What does it teach us? It teaches us that God deals with the wicked and

the righteous, and He does so according to His purposes and plans, many of which are kept secret from us. Moses has put the notice of many births right after the story of Rachel's death in child bearing. It doesn't appear as though there's much justice. Jacob, the chosen one, deals with death. Esau, the rejected one, seems to have multiplied tremendously. And this is the point: God has every right to do as He wills—and He blessed Esau with a large clan.

But there is another point of justice (or injustice). Genesis 35:22 makes a short, almost matter-of-fact statement about Reuben. In an attempt to usurp the head position of the clan (in other words, to displace Jacob), Reuben commits fornication with Jacob's concubine, Bilhah. Like the animals among whom the strongest male sires the season's calves, so Reuben stoops to the pagan ways of his culture to assert his power.

But where is the outrage? Wasn't the unjust debauchery of fornication on the part of Shechem met with the most stern of reprisals by Simeon and Levi? Where now are the sons of Jacob, rising up with “righteous” indignation against Reuben? Nothing is done, even though the text clearly states that the incident was known, and even found its way into Jacob's ears.

Selective “justice” is injustice. How easy it is to cry “justice” when it fits our preconceived conclusions, but how difficult to critique ourselves with an equal standard. What Shechem did was wrong. What Dinah did was wrong. And what Jacob's sons did was wrong. Where the concept of “justice” is defined by fickle mankind, you can count on it being a “variable standard” (the worst kind of oxymoron). The only justice that is true justice is that which is based upon the unchangeable person and revelation of God. It is the Torah which stands us in good stead, and the Ruach (Spirit) is the One who enlivens us to heed its timeless truths.

Yet justice may linger. We should not be unduly distraught when justice seems lacking in our fallen world. Surely we must always strive for justice, and do all in our power to see it prevail. But we should also reckon with the fact that in this fallen world, God's justice may not always be evident. In the end, final justice awaits the rule and reign of the Just One. The presence of injustice in our world, however, must never cause us ultimate defeat. We know and believe that in the end, the scales of justice will be balanced by the One Who does all things well.

Moreover, our strong desire for justice must never overshadow what is to be for us an even greater desire, that is, the demonstration of God's mercy in forgiving sinners. Where true repentance is found, the sinner is forgiven by God, for the scales of justice have been righted through the sacrifice of His own Son. If it can be said of the Judge of all the earth that: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:12) and if He can declare: “...I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer 31:34), then surely we should follow the same pattern in forgiving one another. “Love covers a multitude of sin.”

Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions. Prov 10:12

Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. 1Pet 4:8

The death of Jacob is also recorded in our *parashah*, but only after the narrative makes the pointed note that he had “come *home* to his father, Isaac” (35:27). The travels of Jacob had been many, but his life ended by coming back to the very place where his grandfather had been buried. Jacob, as Israel, returned to the Land of promise—to Hebron, the burial place of his ancestors.

We are given notice that Isaac breathed his last, and that Jacob and Esau buried him there in Hebron. Thus, Jacob and Esau do, once again, meet up. Their differences are laid aside in order to bury their father. This is the last we will hear of Esau in the Genesis narrative. The covenant continues with the line of Jacob—Esau and his generations are outside of the covenant. Yet even though Esau is not chosen as God’s covenant partner, his connection with Isaac requires that his genealogy be reckoned, and thus the entire final portion of our *parashah* is given over to a listing of his offspring. A promise had been made to Esau (Gen 27:39f) and the sacred text therefore records his generations to show its fulfillment.

To our Torah text the ancient Sages attached Isaiah 43 as the *haftarah*. To the notice of the deaths of Rachel and Isaac are added these words of comfort:

But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior

Indeed, the covenant is secure to Jacob and his descendants, because it is based squarely upon God’s omnipotent faithfulness. And if we are within the chosen people of Israel, God’s covenant people, through faith in our Messiah, then these same words of comfort are ours. We may rest confidently in the strong arms of the Almighty, Who will carry us through all manner of struggles to bring us home to our rest, even as He did for Jacob.

These same words of comfort are found in the teaching of our Master, Yeshua: “Take my yoke upon you” (Matt. 11:29). What is the yoke Yeshua enjoins His disciples to receive? It is nothing more or less than the Teachings of God understood through faith and the illumination of the Ruach. Here our Master invites us: “Learn from me!” That is, we are to study and know the ways of Yeshua, and we are to walk in His footsteps, patterning our lives after His.

Yeshua's yoke is pleasant and not burdensome. That is, we have come to understand that His teachings—His explanation of Torah, both in His words and especially in His deeds, are not difficult, but are pleasant and wonderful. “The Torah of Adonai is perfect, converting the soul . . . More to be desired than gold, yes much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb” (Psalm 19).

The “yoke of the kingdom,” given to us by our Master, is simply this: accepting the covenant responsibilities God has given us by His having chosen us to be His people, to bear His Name, to sanctify His Name in all the world. This is our duty, but it is also our privilege. We carry with us the Name of our King, and we do so with great confidence, knowing that He is always with us to strengthen us and enable us to be His witnesses. Like Jacob, we are being transformed into those who walk uprightly, and we do so because we have acknowledge our own inabilities, and have come to rely upon Him alone. In our “limping,” we have become strong.