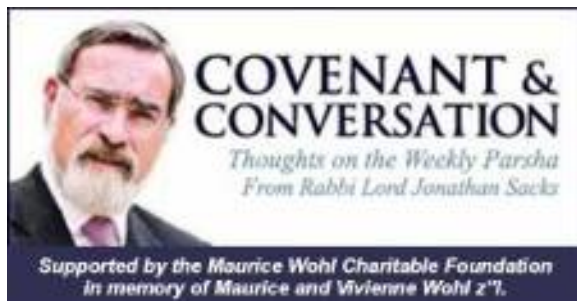


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Fear or Distress?

Jacob and Esau are about to meet again after a separation of twenty two years. It is a fraught encounter. Once, Esau had sworn to kill Jacob in revenge for what he saw as the theft of his blessing. Will he do so now - or has time healed the wound? Jacob sends messengers to let his brother know he is coming. They return, saying that Esau is coming to meet Jacob with a force of four hundred men. We then read:

Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed. (32:8)

The question is obvious. Jacob is in the grip of strong emotions. But why the duplication of verbs? What is the difference between fear and distress? To this a midrash gives a profound answer:

Rabbi Judah bar Ilai said: Are not fear and distress identical? The meaning, however, is that "he was afraid" that he might be killed. "He was distressed" that he might kill. For Jacob thought: If he prevails against me, will he not kill me; while if I prevail against him, will I not kill him? That is the meaning of "he was afraid" - lest he should be killed; "and distressed" - lest he should kill.

The difference between being afraid and distressed, according to the midrash, is that the first is a physical anxiety; the second a moral one. It is one thing to fear one's own death, quite another to contemplate being the cause of someone else's. However, a further question now arises. Surely self-defence is permitted in Jewish law? If Esau were to try to kill Jacob, Jacob would be justified in fighting back, if necessary at the cost of Esau's life. Why then should this possibility raise moral qualms? This is the issue addressed by Rabbi Shabbetai Bass, author of the commentary on Rashi, Sifte Chakhamim:

One might argue that Jacob should surely not be distressed about the possibility of killing Esau, for there is an explicit rule: "If someone comes to kill you, forestall it by killing him." None the less, Jacob did have qualms, fearing that in the course of the fight he might kill some of Esau's men, who were not themselves intent on killing Jacob but merely on fighting Jacob's men. And even though Esau's men were pursuing Jacob's men, and every person has the right to save the life of the pursued at the cost of the life of the pursuer, none the less there is a condition: "If the pursued could have been saved by maiming a limb of the pursuer, but instead the rescuer killed the pursuer, the rescuer is liable to capital punishment on that account." Hence Jacob feared that, in the confusion of battle, he might kill some of Esau's men when he might have restrained them by merely inflicting injury on them.

The principle at stake, according to the Sifte Chakhamim, is the minimum use of force. Jacob was distressed at the possibility that in the heat of conflict he might kill some of the combatants when injury alone might have been all that was necessary to defend the lives of those - including himself - who were under attack.

There is, however, a second possibility, namely that the midrash means what it says, no more, no less: that Jacob was distressed at the possibility of being forced to kill even if that were entirely justified.

At stake is the concept of a moral dilemma. A dilemma is not simply a conflict. There are many moral conflicts. May we perform an abortion to save the life of the mother? Should we obey a parent when he or she asks us to do something forbidden in Jewish law? May we break Shabbat to extend the life of a terminally ill patient? These questions have answers. There is a right course of action and a wrong one. Two duties conflict and we have meta-halakhic principles to tell us which takes priority. There are some systems in which all moral conflicts are of this kind. There is always a decision procedure and thus a determinate answer to the question, "What shall I do?"

A dilemma, however, is a situation in which there is no right answer. I ought not to do A (allow myself to be killed); I ought not to do B (kill someone else); but I must do one or the other. To put it more precisely, there may be situations in which doing the right thing is not the end of the matter. The conflict may be inherently tragic. The fact that one principle (self-defence) overrides another (the prohibition against killing) does not mean that, faced with such a choice, I am without qualms. Sometimes being moral means that I experience distress at having to make such a choice. Doing the right thing may mean that I do not feel remorse or guilt, but I still feel regret or grief that I had to do what I did.

A moral system which leaves room for the existence of dilemmas is one that does not attempt to eliminate the complexities of the moral life. In a conflict between two rights or two wrongs, there may be a proper way to act (the lesser of two evils, or the greater of two goods), but this does not cancel out all emotional pain. A righteous individual may sometimes be one who is capable of distress even when they know they have acted rightly. What the midrash is telling us is that Judaism recognises the existence of dilemmas. Despite the intricacy of Jewish law and its meta-halakhic principles for deciding which of two duties takes priority, we may still be faced with situations in which there is an ineliminable cause for distress. It was Jacob's greatness that he was capable of moral anxiety even at the prospect of doing something entirely justified, namely defending his life at the cost of his brother's.

That characteristic - distress at violence and potential bloodshed even when undertaken in self-defence - has stayed with the Jewish people ever since. One of the most remarkable phenomena in modern history was the reaction of Israeli soldiers after the Six Day War in 1967. In the weeks preceding the war, few

Jews anywhere in the world were unaware that Israel and its people faced terrifying danger. Troops - Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian - were massing on all its borders. Israel was surrounded by enemies who had sworn to drive its people into the sea. In the event, it won one of the most stunning military victories of all time. The sense of relief was overwhelming, as was the exhilaration at the re-unification of Jerusalem and the fact that Jews could now pray (as they had been unable to do for nineteen years) at the Western Wall. Even the most secular Israelis admitted to feeling intense religious emotion at what they knew was an historic triumph.

Yet, in the months after the war, as conversations took place throughout Israel, it became clear that the mood among those who had taken part in the war was anything but triumphal. It was sombre, reflective, even anguished. That year, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem gave an honorary doctorate to Yitzhak Rabin, Chief of Staff during the war. During his speech of acceptance he said:

"We find more and more a strange phenomenon among our fighters. Their joy is incomplete, and more than a small portion of sorrow and shock prevails in their festivities, and there are those who abstain from celebration. The warriors in the front lines saw with their own eyes not only the glory of victory but the price of victory: their comrades who fell beside them bleeding, and I know that even the terrible price which our enemies paid touched the hearts of many of our men. It may be that the Jewish people has never learned or accustomed itself to feel the triumph of conquest and victory, and therefore we receive it with mixed feelings."

A people capable of feeling distress, even in victory, is one that knows the tragic complexity of the moral life. Sometimes it is not enough to make the right choice. One must also fight to create a world in which such choices do not arise because we have sought and found non-violent ways of resolving conflict.



Reuben

While Parshat Vayetzei told us about Jacob's marriage and fatherhood, Parshat Vayishlach unveils some of the problems which Jacob experiences with his family, beginning with the long-anticipated showdown with his brother Esau. This is followed by the rape of Dina, in which Jacob's anxiety and the difficulties he experiences are detailed. Ultimately, the contemplated fratricide of Joseph becomes the defining action within the family.

In this week's Torah portion there is a short episode which seems to be stated in clear terms, nonetheless the exegesis has been debated throughout the centuries.

And it came to pass, when Israel lived in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard it. The sons of Jacob were twelve.
(Genesis 35:22)

The verse has two difficulties -- one in content, the other in form.

How can we understand the tryst between a son of Jacob and one of his wives? This type of behavior is looked upon askance, considered taboo in almost every society. How could Reuben have crossed this incestual boundary?

The second question is not as striking, but disturbing nonetheless: After telling us of this deed, why does the Torah begin a new paragraph in mid-verse?

The Talmud is quick to answer one question while effectively solving the second:

Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman said in Rabbi Jonathan's name: "Whoever says that Reuben sinned is merely making an error, for it is said, Now the sons of Jacob were twelve,

teaching that they were all equal."
(Shabbat 55b)

It seems fairly simple to state that the assumption that Reuben sinned is erroneous, but the text itself seems to state as much in black and white. The Talmud continues:

"Then how do I interpret, and he lay with Bilhah his father's concubine? This teaches that he transposed his father's couch, and the Writ imputes [blame] to him as though he had lain with her." It was taught, Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar said: "That righteous man was saved from that sin and that deed did not come to his hand. Is it possible that his seed was destined to stand on Mount Ebal and proclaim, 'Cursed be he that lies with his father's wife,' yet this sin should come to his hand? But how do I interpret, and he lay with Bilhah his father's concubine? He resented his mother's humiliation. Said he, 'If my mother's sister was a rival to my mother, shall the bondmaid of my mother's sister be a rival to my mother?' [Thereupon] he arose and transposed her couch. Others say, He transposed two couches, one of the Shechinah and the other of his father. Thus it is written, 'Then you defiled my couch on which [the Shechinah] went up.'" (Shabbat 55b)

According to this passage Reuben acted in an inappropriate manner, but he was not guilty of the heinous crime of taking his father's wife, merely involving himself unjustifiably in his father's personal affairs, is considered tantamount to actually have violated her.

His motivation, as understood by Rav Shimon, was his mother's honor. It was one thing for his mother to have been displaced for Rachel, but quite a different matter to be displaced by her servant. Deep inside, everyone including Leah, and her son Reuben knew that Jacob loved Rachel more than anyone else. But once Rachel was in the grave, Jacob should assume his rightful place in the tent of Leah. For some reason Jacob disagreed, and with Rachel's demise he moved his bed to the tent of Bilah. Reuben set out to right

this wrong, and earned eternal infamy for involving himself in "matters of the bedroom" which were not his business.

JACOB'S CONDEMNATION

Despite this exoneration, the text does seem somewhat unequivocal. Additionally, Jacob comments on this episode on his death bed in most unflattering terms.

"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel; because you went up to your father's bed; then defiled you it; he went up to my couch." (Genesis 49:3-4)

Reuben's failure is attributed to this action, he is labeled "unstable," and his status as Jacob's primary heir was forfeited due to this indiscretion.

The birthright should have been yours, priesthood yours, and royalty yours. Now that you have sinned, however, the birthright has been given to Joseph, the priesthood to Levi, and royalty to Judah. (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 98:4)

The Midrash goes further and spells out the sin, telling us that the plain reading of the text is indeed correct.

Rabbi Eliezer interpreted: "Pahazta ('thou didst hasten', Hatatha (thou hast sinned); Zanitha (thou didst commit adultery)." Rabbi Joshua interpreted: "Parakta (thou didst throw off the yoke), Hilalta (thou didst defile my bed) and Za (thy passion did stir within thee)." Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob interpreted: "Pasa'ta (thou didst trample upon the law), Habta (thou didst forfeit thy birthright); Zar (a stranger didst thou become to thy gifts)." (Midrash Rabbah - Genesis 98:4)

There is another passage in the Talmud which points to a sin as having occurred:

The incident of Reuben is read but not translated. On one occasion Rabbi Hanina ben Gamaliel went to Kabul, and the reader of the congregation read, "And it came to pass when Israel abode," and he said to the translator, "Translate only the latter part of the verse," and the Sages commended his action. The second account of the Calf is read but not translated. What is the second account of the Calf? From And Moses said up to and Moses saw. (Megilah 25b)

The purpose of the Targum was to explain to the masses the meaning of the text, but here we find a type of censorship -- the act of Reuben should not be explained. The question is why not? All types of indiscretions are mentioned and taught in the text. The "fall" of Judah, taught in next week's Torah portion does not seem qualitatively superior, yet it is taught in the Torah, taking up an entire chapter, and we don't find later Midrashic hesitations.

It is also interesting to note that the Midrash on our verse does not comment on the episode of Reuben, ostensibly adhering to the ethic of not delving into this episode. Perhaps this would be included in the Mishnaic prohibition of discussing sexual matters, *Sitri Arayot*.¹ Only later does the Midrash delve into the act of Reuben.

There is a second possibility as to the reluctance of using the Targum, it could be that this opinion in the Talmud, disagrees with the Targum. The Targum Onkelos translates the verse literally, thereby accusing Reuben of this outrage. The Targum² states as per the Talmud that Reuben had moved his father's bed. Perhaps as we had seen in the outset, whoever says that Reuben has sinned is mistaken, therefore utilizing a "mistaken" text would be inappropriate.³

However perhaps even this text which says that one who says that Reuben sinned is mistaken, does not mean to say that he did not sin, rather talking about the sin is a mistake.⁴

Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman said in Rabbi Jonathan's name: "Whoever says that Reuben sinned is merely making an error." (Shabbat 55b)

The *Zohar*, which maintains that Reuben did not sleep with Bilhah, does introduce a different motivation for his actions:

Similarly, in the case of Reuben, we should not dream of taking literally the words and he lay with Bilhah. What he did was to prevent her from performing her conjugal duty to his father, and this was the object of his disarranging his father's couch. And, moreover, he did it in the presence of the Shechina; for the Shechina is always present whenever marital intercourse is performed as a religious duty. And whoever obstructs such a performance causes the Shechina to depart from the world.⁵ It is written, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine, and Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. That is to say, they were all included in the number, and their merit was in no way abated. Rabbi Eleazar asked: "Why do we find in this verse first the name Israel and then the name Jacob? The reason may be given as follows. Reuben said to himself: 'My father was intended to raise twelve tribes and no more, yet now he is about to beget more children. Does he then wish to disqualify us and replace us with others?' So straightway he disarranged the couch and prevented the intended intercourse, thereby slighting, as it were, the honour of the Shechina that hovered over that couch. Hence it is written first and Israel heard, since it was by that name that he was exalted among the twelve hidden ones which are the twelve pure rivers of balsam, and then and the sons of Jacob were twelve, alluding to the twelve tribes by whom the Shechina was adorned and whom the Torah again enumerated (176b) as before, implying that they were all of them holy, all of them considered by the Shechina worthy to behold the

sanctity of their Master; for had Reuben really committed the act mentioned, he would not have been included in the number. For all that, he was punished by being deprived of the birthright and by its transference to Joseph, as we read: And the sons of Reuben, the first-born of Israel, for he was the first-born, but forasmuch as he defiled his father's couch, his birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph. (1 Chronicles 6). We see from this how all that God does is planned with profound wisdom, and every act of a man leaves its imprint and is preserved before the Almighty. For on the night when Jacob went in to Leah, all his thoughts were centred upon Rachel, and from that intercourse, and from the first germ, and under that intention Leah conceived; and we have affirmed that had not Jacob been unaware of the deception, Reuben would not have entered into the number.⁶ It is for that reason that he did not receive a name of special significance, but was simply called Reuben (reu ben "behold a son"). But for all that, the intended effect was produced, and the birthright reverted to the eldest son of Rachel, as originally purposed. Thus everything came right in the end, for all the works of the Almighty are based on truth and right." (Zohar, Bereshith, Section 1, Page 176a)

There are a number of issues of note in this passage, first, Reuben's motivation is revealed -- he is concerned about the twelve tribes. Knowing the story of the Rachel/Leah switch, perhaps he feels inadequate. He realizes that he should not have been the first born and perhaps he even suspects that he should not be enumerated within the twelve sons of Jacob at all. Ironically, due to this preemptive action he lost his birthright.

The second point of note, is that according to the *Zohar*, the second half of the verse is understood that out of concern that there be *only* twelve sons Reuben acted. Reuben's concern with the number of children in the family could also be related to the fact that, as

first born, he would receive a double portion, again ironically lost and given to Joseph instead.

THE MANDRAKES

This is not the first instance where we see Reuben involved in an action which may relate to the number of children in the family.

And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Give me, I beg you, of your son's mandrakes." (Genesis 30:14)

These mandrakes were said to have procreative abilities, therefore the barren Rachel was so keen to procure them, and was even willing to exchange her conjugal rights with her sister. Again, we find Reuben involved in activities, which would impact the number of children which the family would number.⁷

There is one more issue which may allow us to have deeper understanding of Reuben's actions. As noted above, the text tells us:

And it came to pass, when Israel lived in that land, that Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard it. The sons of Jacob were twelve. (Genesis 35:22)

The text clearly says that Reuben was with his father's concubine, on the other hand we were already told that Jacob had taken her as a wife.

And she said, "Behold my maid Bilhah, go in to her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her." And she gave him Bilhah her maidservant to wife; and Jacob went in to her. (Genesis 30:3-4)

What was the relationship, was she a wife or a concubine?

STAKING THE CLAIM

Evidently, Reuben saw her as merely his father's concubine. This may shed light on his actions. In Jewish law, a king is permitted to take a concubine.

Perhaps this was Reuben's way of staking his claim on the kingship. If this woman who was his father's concubine was now taken by him (Reuben), it would indicate his usurping of his father's power and stature.

As a result, the punishment which Reuben suffered was threefold -- he lost the birthright, the priesthood and the kingship -- as we saw above.

The tragedy of Reuben, reverberates throughout these Torah portions, leading to the end of the Book of Genesis. Instead of being a spiritual leader, his position is auxiliary -- he lost the leadership that he was apparently seeking and he lost the double portion he was apparently seeking and he lost the priesthood.

In the end we do not know what really was the sin of Reuben, yet numerous sources speak of the repentance of Reuben. Perhaps this is the reason we are not to discuss his failures.

One thing is certain -- greatness is not something which we are born into, it is not a birthright. Greatness must be earned. It can not be arranged, nor acquired by deception. Perhaps, as his mother had used deception, and his father had used deception, Reuben felt that this was his mandate as well. Perhaps he believed that he had to go create his own destiny -- whatever the means, the ends always justify one's action. Unfortunately for Reuben, that is just not so.

1. Mishna Chagiga 2:1, the term *sitrie*, "secret," is used in the Talmud on the same page.

2. [Psuedo] Yonatan [Yerushami]

3. Parallel sources have instead of the word "mistaken" the word "foolish." This would lean in the direction that it is not a "mistaken" position, rather one which should not be stated. See Kasher in Torah Shlema note 93.

4. I have often wondered what constitutes heresy believing an unacceptable position or stating it. See the Mishna in Chelek: "All Israel have a portion in the world to come -- for it is written, *Thy people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land for ever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified* -- but the following have no portion therein: he who says that resurrection is not a biblical doctrine, the Torah was not divinely revealed, and the heretic.

5. The verse begins *And it came to pass when Israel lived* -- Maimonies in "The Guide for the Perplexed" associates this word "lived" -- *bishachen* -- with the *Shechina*.

6. This idea may also explain how Jacob could have blatantly acted in a manner against a section of the Torah, which prohibits a father from disinheriting the son of the hated wife in favor of the son of the loved wife. Jacob, when intimate with Leah, thought he was with Rachel. Therefore the *Zohar* maintains that mystically the firstborn was destined to be a son of Rachel.

7. There is a mystical tradition taught by the Ariz'al, that Jacob was to have had fifteen children, but Reuben's action frustrated the

plan, therefore the two children that should have been born via the relationship with Bilah instead were born to Joseph.



The Name of the Angel

And Yaakov asked, and said,
"What is your name please?" and
[the angel] replied, "Why do you
ask my name?" (Gen. 32:30)

Throughout the night, Yaakov struggled with the angel of Eisav, and he was victorious. Toward morning, the angel asks Yaakov to release him, but Yaakov refuses unless the angel blesses him. The angel informs Yaakov that his name will be changed to Yisrael. "And what is your name?" Yaakov asks the angel. But the angel's only response is a cryptic question, "Why do you ask my name?"

What is the implication of this dialogue?

According to our Sages, this angel was the guardian angel of Eisav, also known as Satan, also known as the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination. Rav Leib Chasman explains that, since the name of a person or being reflects his essence, when Yaakov asked the angel for his name he was actually trying to discover his essence. He was actually saying, "What are you all about, *yetzer hara*? What makes you tick? What is the secret of your power over people?"

And the angel replied, "Why do you ask my name?" In other words, explains Rav Leib Chasman, there is no point in asking this question. The *yetzer hara* is not a reality, only a figment of the imagination. It is an image that is conjured in the mind when a person is consumed by desire. But in reality, there is no separate entity called the *yetzer hara*. It is the person himself.

Sometimes, a person lies in the dark and sees huge shadows forming on the wall. He is terrified. Perhaps it is a bear, or an intruder. But then he flicks on the light and sees that it was nothing, only his own overactive imagination. This is the *yetzer hara*, a

shadow in the night, a figure of fantasy, without reality, without essence. And when you flick on the light, you discover that nothing was there in the first place.

Rav Chaim Dov Keller offers a different interpretation of the dialogue between Yaakov and the angel. He interprets Yaakov's question along the same lines as does Rav Chasman. Yaakov wanted to know the essence of the *yetzer hara*, because he wanted to forewarn his descendants and fortify them against this formidable foe.

"Why do you ask my name?" the angel replied. "It is a pointless endeavor to prepare your descendants for their encounters with me. My mission is to test people, and in order to do this, I change form in every generation. The situations change, the temptations change, and I change. In one generation, the temptation may be idol worship, and that is where I concentrate my efforts. In another generation, it may be the heresies of so-called enlightenment, and that is where I concentrate my efforts. I am always taking on a different form and changing my essence. Telling what my name is now would not help your descendants in the future."

In our own times, it seems to me, the changed form of the *yetzer hara* is the pursuit of wealth and worldly pleasures. Materialism is the bane of our generation. And that chameleon known as the *yetzer hara* is working actively to promote it.



By Force and By Friend

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

In this week's parsha, Jacob journeys homeward after a 22-year absence, and meets his brother, Esau, on the way. Jacob prepares himself for the potentially dangerous encounter in three ways: he prays to God; he divides his family into two camps (a protective measure in case of battle); and he sends gifts ahead to his brother.

Our mystical tradition teaches that Esau is the personification of the *yetzer hara* (inclination toward negativity) in this world. Therefore, on a deeper level, Jacob is not only preparing himself to meet Esau, but is readying himself to battle the *yetzer hara*.

Jacob pleads to God, *"Please save me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau"* (Genesis 32:12). Why does Jacob use this repetitive language? He has only one brother, and there is only one Esau. Either description would have been sufficient on its own!

The Kedushat Levi and the Ben Ish Chai both understand this seeming redundancy as a hint to two different approaches of the *yetzer hara*.

One approach of the *yetzer hara* is to attack us outright, and to try to actively prevent us from following God's will. This approach is called *"Esau"* - the overt use of force to keep us from practicing Judaism.

But the *yetzer hara* can also make inroads by causing us to let down our guard. This more subtle approach is what Jacob calls *"my brother."* At times, nations will not attack us overtly, but will instead try to befriend us. Historically, this approach has the same effect as the use of force. When we become relaxed and comfortable within a non-Jewish environment, the clarity of what God wants from us begins to fade, and we are susceptible to giving up our beliefs.

Through this idea, we can see that the verse is not redundant at all. When Jacob asks to be saved *"from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau,"* he is asking for two different types of protection. He requests the strength to resist the temptations of false brotherhood and camaraderie (*"my brother"*) as well as the ability to protect himself from overt physical attack (*"Esau"*).

May we all be blessed with clarity and awareness, so that we will not be taken advantage of or swayed - either by force or by false friendship - to compromise our Judaism.