

TORAH TABLE TALK – PIRKE AVOT

Life Doesn't Come with Guarantees

Parshat Vayishlach, Genesis 32:4 – 36:43

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren ז"ל, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Our forefather, Jacob, did not live a peaceful life. After deceiving Isaac, he was the victim of a series of deceptions. He lived for twenty years in the shadow of his own guilt with a dishonest father-in-law who took advantage of his naivety. He watched his wives compete for his affection. He witnessed the rape of his daughter, and saw the worst in his sons who tricked the people of Shechem and then killed the males in the city. Jacob lost his favored son Joseph to jealousy and spent twenty years mourning for him. It's no wonder that when Jacob is introduced to Pharaoh toward the end of the story he says that his years have been 'few and evil.' As Robert Alter points out, in the end Jacob gets everything he wants but there has been a high price to pay for success and fulfillment. Some of his suffering is self-inflicted and some of it is simply a product of the uncertainties and cruelties of chance.

In *Parshat Vayishlach*, Jacob is reconciled with his brother, Esau, and returns to his ancestral home. But this too is a moment of fear and anxiety, as Jacob prepares to encounter his brother for the first time in twenty years. Jacob's wrestling match with the night time visitor is a paradigm of his entire life of struggle and uncertainty. Out of this wrestling match he is transformed into a new person but not without a price. In the end one imagines him carrying the physical and psychic wounds for the rest of his life.

I am not certain that I would call Jacob a righteous man, but, then again, who is really righteous? None of us are without fault but do we deserve to suffer? At one time or other, each of us has asked why, 'bad things happen to good people,' or why such trials have been inflicted on us or on others. As Rabbi Yannai points out, in the end there are no answers to these questions. The question of human suffering and unfair wellbeing to the wicked eludes us.

Pirke Avot 4:15 Rabbi Yannai used to say: Neither the well-being of the wicked nor the suffering of the righteous are in our hands. Rabbi Matyah ben Heresh used to say: Be first in greeting every man. Be a tail among lions rather than a head to foxes.

Sources

Genesis Rabbah 84:3

Rabbi Aha said: When the righteous wish to dwell in tranquility in this world, Satan comes and accuses them: "They are not content with what is in store for them in the hereafter, but they wish to dwell at ease even in this world!" The proof lies in the fact that the Patriarch Jacob wished to live at ease in this world, whereupon he was attacked by Joseph's Satan; thus, "And Jacob dwelt in the land..." (Genesis 37:1) "I was not at ease, neither was I quiet, etc." (Job 3:26). "I was not not at ease" - from Esau; "Nor was I quiet" - from Laban; "Neither had I quiet" - through Dinah; "And trouble came," - through Joseph; thus, "And Jacob dwelt." (Genesis 37:1)

Genesis 47:9

Jacob said to Pharaoh: The years of my sojourn (on earth) are one hundred and thirty; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life; nor do they measure up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns.

Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses, page 273

Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life. Jacob's somber summary of his own life echoes with a kind of complex solemnity against all that we have seen him undergo. He has, after all, achieved all that he aspired to achieve: the birthright, the blessing, marriage to his beloved Rachel, property and wealth. But one measure of the profound moral realism of the story is that although he gets everything he wanted, it is not in the way he would have wanted, and the consequence is far more pain than contentment... This is, in sum, a story with a happy ending that withholds any simple feelings of happiness in the end.

Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 101a

When Rabbi Eliezer fell sick, four elders -- Rabbis Tarfon, Joshua, Eleazar ben Azariah, and Akiva came to visit him. Rabbi Akiva spoke up and said, "Suffering is precious." At that, Rabbi Eliezer said to his disciples, "Prop me up, that I may hear [better] the words of Akiva, my disciple, who has said, 'Suffering is precious.' What proofs have you, Akiva, my son, for saying it?"

Commentary

This saying in *Pirke Avot* is the only statement in rabbinic literature attributed to Rabbi Yannai. While Rabbi Judah HaNasi chose to record his opinion in *Pirke Avot*, one wonders whether the sages were so scandalized by his point of view that they chose not record any other statements in his name. After all, they had a pretty clear understanding of why people suffer: most people suffer because they sin. And the righteous who don't appear to be deserving of such pain often suffer *Yissurin Shel Ahavah*, literally, 'the suffering of love.' That is, good people suffer in this world so that their reward in the world to come will be more complete while the wicked are sometimes rewarded in this world so that their punishment in the next world will be more severe.

While this is an attempt to tie up all the loose ends when it comes to the question of theodicy and human suffering, it would seem that Rabbi Yannai was not satisfied with this explanation. We can understand his statement in one of two ways: either, 'we are not capable of *understanding* why the good sometimes suffer while the wicked live in ease,' or, we have no control over the suffering and wellbeing of the good and the wicked. In other words, much as we would like to think that there is some hidden logic to why good things happen to some people and not others, in the end there are no guarantees for how things happen in this world. Bad things sometimes happen despite our good intentions and best attempts. That is a discouraging point of view that seems to border on heresy but I believe it is an honest appraisal of life's reality. And the truth is, whether we are rewarded or punished in the world to come does not really assuage our pain and suffering in this world, despite Rabbi Akiva's statement that 'suffering is precious.'

Rabbi Matyah offers a counter balance to Rabbi Yannai. It is no accident that his statement is paired up with Rabbi Yannai's statement in a single Mishnah. I would like to suggest that Rabbi Matyah's statement in some ways assuages the severity of Yannai's statement. Rather than being paralyzed by the thought that we have no control or comprehension of human suffering, Rabbi Matyah suggests that we should go on living: greet people cheerfully and strive to do the best we can even if that means settling for less than we dreamed of in life. Life has its own pleasures, and we should enjoy them because there are almost certain disappointments along the way as well.

I appreciate Rabbi Judah's decision to include Rabbi Yannai's aphorism in the *Mishnah*. He wasn't afraid of a controversial point of view. And he was not willing to settle for simplistic solution to the question of human suffering. Personally, I find "we don't know" more satisfying than the more complete answer which presumes we understand the painful mysteries of life.

Questions to Ponder

1. Do you think Jacob was correct to describe the years of his life as 'few and evil?' In what ways is his response typical of the way some older people respond when they look back at their lives?
2. Did Jacob suffer inordinately? To what extent do you think he was responsible for the misfortunes and suffering that he faced throughout his life? How would you respond to his statement?
3. The passage from Genesis Rabbah speaks about 'Joseph's Satan.' What do you think this mean? How might a belief in a demonic realm help people understand why 'bad things happen to good people?' Where else do we find Satan in the Bible and the Jewish tradition?
4. There are two explanations for Rabbi Yannai's aphorism above. Which one makes most sense to you? Which one comes closest to the truth?
5. What does Rabbi Akiva mean when he says that 'suffering is precious?' Have you ever looked back at your life and felt that your trials and tribulations were beneficial to you in some way? Do you think it is ever appropriate to tell someone who is suffering or in distress that their suffering is precious?
6. The night before his meeting with Esau, the Torah says that Jacob was, "was frightened and anxious." How can faith help us in times of distress? Read Jacobs prayer (Genesis 32:10-13). If we accept Rabbi Yannai's statement, then what can we realistically expect from God?

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