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Parshat Vayishlach: On Facing Fears Rabba Sara Hurwitz

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Yaakov has shied away from confrontation his entire life. His mother orchestrated stealing the blessing from Eisav, and then suggests he run away, lest his brother kill him. Yaakov then spends 20 years at Lavan's house as his slave. Despite his apparent distrust of Lavan, Yaakov does not leave, even after he fulfilled his obligation of Leah and Rachel's dowry. It was not until God commanded Yaakov to get up and leave (Bereishit 31:13) that he gathered up the courage to depart. Yaakov's modus operandi has always been to avoid confrontation.

And so, it is no surprise that he is apprehensive about coming face-to-face with his brother, Eisav. The root for face—panav—is repeated five times in two verses (Bereishit 32:21-22):

And you shall say: Moreover, behold, your servant Jacob is behind us.'
For he said: 'I will appease him (his **face**) with the tribute that will go
before me (my **face**), and afterward I will see his **face**; perhaps he will
accept me (my **face**).' So the tribute passed over his **face**

וְאָמַרְתֶּם—גַּם הִנֵּה עֹבֵדְךָ יַעֲקֹב אַחֲרֵינוּ:
כִּי־אָמַר אֲכַפְרָה פָּנָיו, בַּמִּנְחָה הַהִלְכֶת לְפָנָי,
וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן אֲרֹאֶה פָּנָיו אוֹלַי יִשָּׂא פָּנָי. תַּעֲבֹר
הַמִּנְחָה עַל־פָּנָיו...

Yaakov hopes that the tribute will change Eisav's demeanor. Rashi explains that the phrase "achpara panav" means that Yaakov intends to use the gift to erase Eisav's hatred. To literally and metaphorically wipe away the anger in his eyes, in his voice, and change his face by showering him with gifts.

However, he is still not yet ready to confront Eisav. He sends his family ahead, and remains alone (32:25):
And Jacob was left alone לְבִדּוֹ יַעֲקֹב, לְבִדּוֹ יַעֲקֹב;

The Gemara (Hulin 91a), as quoted by Rashi, attempts to explain Yaakov's hesitancy to reconcile with his brother and suggests that Yaakov intended to go back to Lavan's house because he forgot some small jars—"shachach pakim ketanim." "Small jars" evoke images of compact makeup cases or little jars of cologne, things that help cover up blemishes, rather than face them. Kierkegaard in his essay "Fear and Trembling" (p43) describes this type of person, who will never find the time to move forward: "he will continually be running errands in life and will never enter into eternity, for in the moment he approaches it, he will suddenly discover that he has forgotten something and therefore must go back."

Yaakov cannot move towards reconciliation. He would rather busy himself with minutia than confront Eisav. He would rather retreat back to Lavan, alone, than face his brother.

It is at this moment that Yaakov realizes that his fear of confrontation is due to a quality that he lacks within himself. Perhaps, he hoped that the small jars he went back to retrieve would fill an unexplained void. For the first time, he begins to confront his own culpability in cheating Eisav out of the bracha. Yaakov recognizes that he has to go through a process of kaparah (atonement) and change something within himself, before he can encounter his brother.

And suddenly, Yaakov finds himself face to face with the thing he fears most: his fear of confrontation, coupled with his newfound knowledge of his own shortcomings. He is propelled into a mysterious struggle with an unnamed man. Many commentators believe that Yaakov was struggling with Eisav's emissary, with Eisav's guardian angel, with Eisav's very essence. For the first time, Yaakov finds himself in a

confrontation, and the two cannot reconcile their differences, they cannot coexist until Yaakov sheds his baggage, until he can look at the man in the face and repent.

This place of transformation, where Yaakov conquers his fear of confrontation, is called Peniel (God's face). Peniel becomes the place where he is now able to lift up his own face, and look directly at his brother's face. Now he can say (33:10):

I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of a Divine Being. כִּי עַל־פְּנֵי כְּרַאת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים

Pineal—the place of encounter between Yaakov and the Angel, and Yaakov and Eisav is a place of facing fears, a place of repentance and reconciliation. Of face time.

Rabba Sara's Overarching Theme:

Feeling God's presence, shouldn't be that difficult. "You shall walk after the Lord your God,"(Devarim 12:5) we are told; seek out God's presence. And yet, astonished, R. Hama son of R. Hanina (Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a) asks, how is it possible to walk with the Shechina? Rav Hama quotes an early pasuk from Devarim that describes "... the Lord your God as a devouring Fire."(Devarim 4:24). How is it possible to get close to God without being scorched? R. Hama answers his own question: We must walk after the midot, after the attributes of God, not his immediate presence.

In Hebrew, good attributes, midot, are translated as "good measures." Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*, suggests that a quality is determined by its proportion. In other words our midot are the balance of our varied characteristic traits. To act Godly is to put our best spiritual essence forward, while trying to keep in check the inevitability of negative attributes. We are at once both good and bad, compassionate and injurious.

At Maharat, our students are ordained with the ability to lead, pasken, and teach. But, they must also be finely attuned to the nuances of the human condition. Spiritual leaders are most effective when they have confronted and understand their own midot, their own balance of human traits. Our Torah narratives bring to bare the multi-layers of the characteristic traits that individuals must learn to balance within themselves. And so, I offer this weekly parsha column as a model of Maharat's Pastoral Torah curriculum, where we will explore the rich and varies layers of the human condition.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.