



The Conservative Kehila in Zichron Ya'acov

## Parashat Vayetzeh: Exile and the Wisdom of Evolution

Dear Friends,

This week Yaakov goes into exile. Actually, he flees. He is paying a heavy price for deceiving his father and brother. He doesn't yet know that this exile will last twenty years, and he also doesn't know that he will never see his beloved mother again. A heavy price indeed!

Like Yaakov, we all go into exile sometimes. We all become estranged and disconnected sometimes, and feel that life is happening across the street... just not here. We wait and hope for salvation - the right career, the right partner, the right home - that something that will reconnect us to life and bring us home to ourselves, thereby ending our exile. Most of us feel this way sometimes, some feel this way most of the time.

Both the Torah as well as the wisdom of our Sage tell us that exile is a direct result of a sin.

Yaakov's sin, the one which led him to exile for so long, is so very familiar to us. We all commit that sin. It is perhaps the most common of all, and therefore also the hardest to pin down.

Let's try to understand it from a close reading of the circumstances that led to our forefather's exile.

***His entire life - from the moment of his birth until the day of his death - Yaakov wished to be something or someone else.***

- **He very much wanted to be born first**, but he wasn't. With great craftiness he took advantage of his cooking skills and his brother's hunger in order to tempt Eisav to sell him the birthright. Can the birthright be bought? Of course not! But this did not prevent him from doing so.

- **He wanted his father's love.** Who doesn't? But Yitzchak loved Eisav. The Torah doesn't say that Yitzchak didn't love Yaakov, but his heart was drawn more to the man of the field, the hunter, and less to the young scholar who preferred the indoors, a "mother's boy." In order to change this reality, Yaakov put on his brother's clothes which carried the fragrance of the field, which his father loved so much, to try and claim something that was not meant for him and perhaps gain his father's love.
- Just as he yearned for his father's love, he wanted his father's blessing for Eisav. There was a beautiful blessing meant for him as well, but no, Yaakov wanted the other blessing, the one meant for his brother.
- Yaakov preferred Rachel to all of his other wives, and he preferred Yosef to all of his sons. These two preferences wreaked havoc, disaster, and great pain in his home and in his life.
- Even in his old age, after he had settled in Egypt, he continued to calculate and make comparisons (Parashat Vayigash, Bereishit 47:8-9): **"Pharaoh asked Jacob, 'How many are the years of your life?' And Jacob answered Pharaoh, 'The years of my sojourn [on earth] are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the life spans of my fathers during their sojourns.'"** Pharaoh was asking a simple question: How old are you? Yaakov answers, but immediately adds that these were hard and bad, and short in comparison to his father's and grandfather's life. How does he know he won't reach that age, and what does it matter? Pharaoh simply asked him how old he was!
- At the end of his life, on his deathbed, his sons around him listening to his parting words, to his blessings, Yaakov makes a reckoning with each one, handing out grades and comparing one to the other.

Yaakov is so human. We all want to be "something" or "someone"... just not ourselves. We all grade and judge our lives, and always in comparison to someone else.

But you may claim - rightly so - that this is how people grow and evolve; this is how humanity developed, and this is the essence of evolution! Thanks to human aspiration to be something or someone that we no longer live in caves, that we are not hunters, and that we do not have to seek fire in the forests.

It is good to have aspirations - to develop, to fulfill dreams, to realize our potential. It is natural to want more, to be more, to excel, to meet challenges, and to break the glass ceilings. People love change, love changing things in themselves that they do not like or that no longer serve them.

So what's wrong with this??? Why is it a sin???

***There is nothing wrong with developing. It is not a sin to have aspirations. On the contrary! Development is the name of the game. Creation is constantly developing, not only within human beings.***

***In fact, I wish to claim that development is a natural desire, an instinct! It is the true secret of the theory of evolution. It is not survival that powers evolution - as Darwin claimed - but the instinct for development which exists within everything.***

Development is good. Even very good! The question is in what way it happens.

Human beings and some animals develop through observing others. Others give us ideas and inspiration and drive us forward. We want what others have, what works for them. We want to appear as cool/beautiful/smart/successful as they are, or compete successfully in life.

The entire advertising industry is based on this idea - compare yourself to that beautiful, and smart, and cool so and so (OY!). That is also how fashions get started!

Observing others provides inspiration and information, such as what works, and what produces the best results. Indeed, inspiration and information are the positive aspects of observation. There is another side, though, the destructive byproduct of comparison. Like Yaakov, we are always comparing. From a very early age we learn to compare ourselves to our friends, to characters in programs we love, to our siblings, etc. From the moment our eyes open we engage in toxic comparison.

This may be part of the human evolution process, but it is also a huge part of our human tragedy. When development stems from observing others with jealousy, with negative comparison, we are denying who we are.

Denying who we are is the ultimate exile. When we aspire to be someone or something else, we are exiled from ourselves, from our own unique path.

Eisav may have scorned the birthright by selling it in exchange for lentil stew (although he probably thought this was just a childish game and not something serious, as birthrights cannot be transferred), but Yaakov scorned his place as younger brother, mother's boy, the studious one.

In the end, Yaakov does develop - quite nicely too - but not as a hunter or a man of the field. These are all part of Eisav's path of development, not Yaakov's. Eventually

Yaakov grows up and becomes an excellent shepherd. Just like his grandfather, he begins with nothing, and becomes very wealthy, owning a huge flock of sheep.

A little brother who grows up and develops cannot not become the firstborn. He becomes the person he is meant to be.

***I would like to suggest that the secret of development and evolution is to be found here. The evolution of Creation doesn't stem from our personal desire to be someone or something - this that or the other. Rather, Creation itself, Life itself, desires evolution, fulfillment, and growth, unrelated to us and our desires. Creation and Life itself are stronger than our jealousies and elusive desires.***

***I think we can call this mechanism of evolution God...***

We can choose our relationship with this Divine mechanism - urge it forward, help it, fight it - or we can just be aware of it, honor it, recognize it's depth, and make room for it to happen through us.

That requires a whole different relationship with Creation; a different kind of observation - of life, of ourselves, and of others.

Observing others - all others - can and should provide us with a lot of inspiration, but the sooner we can give up comparing ourselves to others, the sweeter our evolution.

The great teacher in this wisdom is not Yaakov, but his beloved son, Yosef. In two weeks' time we will meet Yosef's wisdom, the wisdom which saw the Divine evolution in everything, and which brought greatness to Egypt and while doing so, he saved his family from starvation. Yosef never compared himself to anyone. He experienced the innate instinct for evolvement which was revealed to him in his dreams. In all dreams.

Until then, Shabbat Shalom and sweet evolution.

Elisha