

5784 – Genesis 47-50 - Vayechi (And he lived)

THE THREE LIVES OF JACOB¹

Jacob was a wholesome man, a dweller of tents (Genesis 25:27).

Jacob strove with Laban ... and he said ... "These twenty years of mine in your house; I labored for you, fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you switched my wage tens of times ..." (Genesis 31:36-41)

Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years (Genesis 47:28).

The Torah devotes more than twenty-five chapters (Genesis 25-50) to the life of Jacob, the third and "choicest of the patriarchs"⁽¹⁾—a life which spanned three lands:

- a) The Holy Land, where Jacob spent the first half of his life⁽²⁾ secluded in "the tents of learning."
- b) The Mesopotamian city of Charan, where Jacob spent twenty years in the employ of "Laban the Deceiver," fathered eleven of his twelve sons, and amassed much wealth and many possessions.
- c) The land of Egypt, where Jacob resided for the last years of his life.

Many events, triumphs, and tribulations crowd each of these three epochs in the saga of Jacob. But each period also represents a particular state of affairs in Jacob's life and in his relationship with his environment, **providing us with three major "signposts"⁽⁴⁾ by which to negotiate our own lives' reiteration of the lives of our ancestors.**

SOVEREIGNTY, STRUGGLE, AND SUBJUGATION

To what extent are we the master of our circumstances? Rare is the person who could offer a single, consistent reply to this question. Rather, we recognize various states of dependency and control, various degrees of mastery over our lives. Generally speaking, we experience three such states: sovereignty, struggle, and subjugation.

We all harbor a vision of a transcendent self, of a soul pure and inviolable at the core of our being. This self, we are convinced, is not subject to the caprice of circumstance, remaining forever aloof from the shifting dictates of society and convention. And though this core self is not always accessible to us, there come moments in our lives "moments of truth," we call them—in which it asserts its will over every and any influence save its own internal truth.

But these moments, for most of us, are few and far between. More often, we are in a state of struggle—struggle with our environment, with our

own habits and behavior patterns, with the passions of our divided hearts.

While a state of struggle indicates that we have not attained full mastery over our existence, it is also a sign of life: we have not succumbed. We are resisting the forces that seek to sway us from our internal truth; we are engaging them and battling them. Indeed, this is life at its fullest and most productive—even more so, in a certain sense, than those "moments of truth" of resolute perfection.

But we also know times of powerlessness and subordination. Times when we are faced with circumstances which we lack the ability to control, or to even resist. **Times when it seems that life has been stopped dead in its tracks, arrested by an impregnable wall of helplessness and despair.**

IN JACOB'S LIFE

Jacob was a *tzaddik*—a perfectly righteous person, who never for a moment ceased to exercise a full and unequivocal mastery over his life. But within the context of Jacob's perfect existence, he experienced the equivalents of all three states of life described above.

Jacob's years in the Holy Land were years of tranquil perfection—years in which nothing alien to his quintessential self intruded upon his life of Torah study, prayer, and service of G-d.

Jacob's Charan years were characterized by challenge and struggle. There he locked horns with Laban the Deceiver and bested him at his own game:⁽⁶⁾ there "heat consumed me by day, and frost at night; and sleep was banished from my eyes."⁽⁷⁾ In the words of Esau's angel to Jacob upon Jacob's return from Charan, **"You strove with the divine and with men, and you prevailed."**⁽⁸⁾

For the last seventeen years of his life, Jacob lived in the land of Egypt. If Charan was "the object of G-d's wrath in the world"⁽⁹⁾ Egypt was "the depravity of the earth"⁽¹⁰⁾ the most G-dless and debased society of all time. In Egypt, Jacob was forced to pay homage to Pharaoh,⁽¹¹⁾ the arch-idol and demigod of the land. Upon Jacob's passing in Egypt, his body was in the possession of the Egyptian "physicians" for forty days, who embalmed it after their custom.⁽¹²⁾ Indeed, the reason why Jacob commanded Joseph to bury him in the Holy Land (a feat which required much maneuvering and manipulation to secure Pharaoh's consent⁽¹³⁾) was that he feared that, in Egypt, his body and gravesite would become an object of idolatry.⁽¹⁴⁾

Jacob's Egyptian years thus represent what, in the context of his perfectly sovereign life, was a time of subjugation to an alien power. Yet the Torah regards these as the best years of his life!⁽¹⁵⁾ For Jacob knew to exploit the very circumstances which seem to inhibit and arrest one's vitali-

¹ Yanki Tauber, *The Inside Story, Genesis*, (Meaningful Life Center), pp. 416-421.

ty and achievement, as circumstances to foster the strivings of his soul and further its aims. Indeed, it was here in Egypt, under the rule and subsequent enslavement of the Pharaohs, that Jacob's descendants were forged into the people of Israel.

THE SIGNPOSTS

"Everything that happened to the patriarchs ... is destined to their descendants."⁽¹⁶⁾ Not that they occur in exactly the same manner. Our own moments of transcendence seem fleeting and inconsequential in comparison with Jacob's decades of tranquil perfection in the Holy Land. Our own struggles seem (weak) and inept when measured against Jacob's Charan years. Our own lives under circumstances of subjugation and oppression seem black indeed when set against Jacob's Egyptian period. Yet the three lives of Jacob are "signposts" that guide, inspire, and enable our own.

Jacob's life in the Holy Land empowers us to experience moments of true freedom—moments in which we assert our true will over all forces, both external and internal, that seek to quell it.

Jacob's Charan years inspire and enable us to not only persevere in our struggles but to revel in them, to experience them as vibrant and exhilarating periods in our lives.

Finally, Jacob's Egyptian period teaches us how to deal with those situations in which we feel overpowered by forces beyond our control. It teaches us that these times, too, are part and parcel of our lives. Also these times can be negotiated with wisdom, dignity, and integrity, and can be realized as vital and productive seasons of our lives.

(1) *Midrash Rabbah, Bereishith* 76:1; cf. Talmud, *Pesachim* 56a.

(2) As well as the years between his return from Charan and his relocation to Egypt.

(3) See Rashi's commentaries on Genesis 25:27 and 28:9.

(4) See citation from Nachmanides in introduction to this book, p. XVIII.

(5) In his Tanya, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi describes the spiritual and moral characteristics of three types of people: the *tzaddik* (perfectly righteous person), the *beinoni* ("intermediate" person), and the *rasha* (sinner or wicked person):

The *tzaddik* enjoys a perpetual and absolute mastery over his life: he never behaves contrary to the will of his quintessential self, nor does any such thought enter his mind or any such desire invade his heart. He is fully in control, and thus leads a life of flawless, tranquil perfection.

At the other extreme is the *rasha*, who succumbs to the materialism of his environment and the animal passions of his heart. His soul is a prisoner in its own palace, its energies diverted to pursuits that are alien to it but which it is powerless to resist.

The *beinoni* occupies the middle ground between these two extremes. The "intermediate man" neither triumphs nor surrenders—he struggles. His life is a perpetual battle to maintain his integrity in the face of all corrupting influences, both from without and from within.

Thus, the basic state of the *tzaddik* is one of sovereignty; of the *beinoni*, struggle; and of the *rasha*, surrender. Yet **all three types experience moments that resemble—within the context of their own basic state—all three states being described above.**

(6) In Jacob's words to Rachel, "If his power is in deception, I am his brother in deception" (*Midrash Rabbah, Bereishith* 70:12).

(7) Genesis 31:40.

(8) *Ibid.*, 32:29.

(9) Rashi on Genesis 11:32 (*Charan* means "wrath").

(10) Genesis 42:9, et al.

(11) *Ibid.*, 47:7-10,

(12) *Ibid.*, 50:2-3.

(13) See Rashi on Genesis 50:6.

(14) *Ibid.*, 47:29.

(15) See *Baal HaTurim* on Genesis 47:28.

(16) *Tanchuma, Lech Lecha* 9; Nachmanides' commentary on Genesis 12:6.

1. *Many events, triumphs, and tribulations crowd each of these three epochs in the saga of Jacob. But each period also represents a particular state of affairs in Jacob's life and in his relationship with his environment, providing us with three major "signposts"⁽⁴⁾ by which to negotiate our own lives' reiteration of the lives of our ancestors.*

a. Jeremiah 3:6-10

⁶During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. ⁷I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and **her unfaithful sister Judah saw it.** ⁸I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; **she also went out and committed adultery.**

⁹Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. ¹⁰In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense," declares the LORD.

b. John 13:12-16

¹²When (Yeshua) had finished washing (his disciples) feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵**I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.** ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

c. 1Corinthians 10:1-13

¹For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ²They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Messiah. ⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶Now **these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.** ⁷Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry" (Exo 32:6). ⁸We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died (Num 25:1-9). **We should not test Messiah, as some of them did**—and were killed by snakes (Num 21:5-6). ¹⁰And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel (Num 16:41-50). **These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.** ¹²So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And **God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.**

2. *More often, we are in a state of struggle-struggle with our environment, with our own habits and behavior patterns, with the passions of our divided hearts.*

a. Romans 7:7-12

⁷What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." ⁸But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. ⁹Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. ¹²So then, **the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.**

1) How can the law be "holy ... righteous and good" (v. 12) if "the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (v. 10)?

b. James 1:12-15

¹²Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. ¹³When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, **nor does he tempt anyone;** ¹⁴but **each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.** ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

3. *Jacob was a tzaddik—a perfectly righteous person, who never for a moment ceased to exercise a full and unequivocal mastery over his life. But within the context of Jacob's perfect existence, he experienced the equivalents of all three states of life described above.*

a. Often people call someone a *tzaddik* simply because he is an exceptionally good person² ... Yet the most special thing about a *tzaddik* is that he really is **the most human of human beings.**

Tzaddik צדיק is a form of the Hebrew verb צדק [TzDK], which carries the meaning of doing what is correct and just. Weights that are calibrated correctly are called *moznei tzedek*. The judge is urged, "*Tzedek, Tzedek* you shall pursue!" Meaning: that which was wronged should be righted, that which was stolen should be returned to its owner, the innocent should not suffer, and those who have caused harm shall be corrected so that they will return to doing good. *Tzedek* is making everything the way it should be.

So too, the personality of **the *tzaddik* is calibrated to the Manufacturer's original specifications, so that everything about him is just as his Creator meant it should be, and all he desires is what his Creator desires.** A *tzaddik* is one who embodies the Creator's primal conception of the human being—which means that the *tzaddik* is a human being like all of us.

The *tzaddik* feels pain and pleasure. He grins, he smiles, he cries and he laughs. He suffers bitterness of the spirit, and he dances with joy. At times his heart palpitates with love, and at others his veins burn with outrage. He is frustrated by failure, exhilarated by success; he revels in the celebrations of life, and mourns when those he loves depart from it. Because all these things are included in the character of the human being as G-d made him ...

b. In classic Jewish thought, there are various definitions of a *tzadik*. According to Maimonides (based on Tractate *Yevamot* [Brother's Widow] of the Babylonian Talmud 49b-50a): "One whose merit surpasses his iniquity is a *Tzadik*."³

—The feminine form is *Tzadeket*/*Tzidkaniot*.

c. According to Shneur Zalman of Liadi's *Tanya*, a work of Hasidic Judaism, the true title of *Tzadik* denotes a spiritual description of the soul. Its true meaning can only be applied to one who has completely sublimated their natural "animal" or "vital" soul inclinations into holiness, so that they experience only love and awe of God, without material temptations. Hence, a *tzadik* serves as a vehicle (*מרכבה* [*merkavah*]) to God and has no ego or self-consciousness. Note that **a person cannot attain such a level**, rather it is granted from on High (or born with, etc.). This select level elevates the "Intermediate" person (*beinoni*) into one who never sins in thought, speech or action. Unlike the *Tzadik*, they only experience divine *devekut* (communion) during devoted moments of worship or study, while in mundane life they can be tempted by natural inclinations, but always choose to stay connected to holiness.⁴

d. 1Kings 8:46-51

⁴⁶"When (your people) sin against you—**for there is no one who does not sin**—and you become angry with them and give them over to their enemies ... ⁴⁷and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you ... and say, 'We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly' ... ⁴⁹then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. ⁵⁰And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you, and cause their captors to show them mercy; ⁵¹**for they are your people and your inheritance**, whom you brought out of Egypt ...

1) Psalms 130:3

³If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?

2) Psalms 143:2

²Do not bring your servant into judgment, for **no one living is righteous before you**.

3) Proverbs 20:9

⁹**Who can say**, "I have kept my heart pure; **I am clean and without sin**"?

4) Ecclesiastes 7:20

²⁰Indeed, **there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins**.

5) Romans 3:21-24

²¹But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness is given through ~~faith in~~ (*the faithfulness of*) Yeshua the Messiah to all who ~~believe~~ (*continue trusting*). There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³for **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**, ²⁴and all are ~~justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came~~ (*granted the status of being considered righteous before him, through the act redeeming us from our enslavement to sin that was accomplished*) by Messiah Yeshua.

6) 1John 1:8

⁸**If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us**.

e. Hebrews 4:14-16

¹⁴Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Yeshua the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—**yet he did not sin**. ¹⁶Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

4. *In the words of Esau's angel to Jacob upon Jacob's return from Charan, "You strove **with the divine and with men**, and you prevailed."*

a. Genesis 32:22-32

²³After (Jacob) had sent (his family) across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴So Jacob was left alone, **and a man wrestled with him till daybreak**. ²⁵When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, **because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome**." ²⁹Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. ³⁰So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, **"It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared"**. ³¹The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was

3 Mishneh Torah, *Sefer Madda* (Book of Knowledge), Laws of Repentance 3:1.

4 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tzadik>

limping because of his hip. ³²Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob's hip was touched near the tendon.

- b. **If the angel Jacob wrestled with was “Esau’s angel” then why would the “match” be described as Jacob striving “with the divine”?**

5. *Finally, Jacob's Egyptian period teaches us how to deal with those situations in which we feel overpowered by forces beyond our control. It teaches us that **these times, too, are part and parcel of our lives**. Also these times can be negotiated with wisdom, dignity, and integrity, and can be realized as vital and productive seasons of our lives.*

- a. Genesis 50:18-21

¹⁸His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰**You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done**, the saving of many lives. ²¹So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

- b. Jeremiah 29:10-14

¹⁰This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "**plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future**. ¹²Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

- c. Psalms 42:5

⁵Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

- d. Romans 8:28

²⁸And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.