

5784 - Genesis 44-47 - Vayigash (And he approached)

HOMESTEAD AND HOLDING PEN¹

*Israel settled in the land of Egypt, in the country of Goshen; and **they took hold of it**, and grew and multiplied exceedingly* (Genesis 47:27).

With these words, the Torah describes the beginnings of the first *galut* (exile) of the Jewish people, as Jacob and his seventy children and grandchildren relocated from the Holy Land and settled in the land of Egypt.

On the face of it, it was quite an agreeable beginning. One of their own, Joseph, was the *de facto* ruler of Egypt. Goshen, the choicest bit of Egyptian real estate, was theirs to settle. Settle it they did, finding it fertile soil for their individual and communal growth, in both the material and the spiritual sense.⁽¹⁾

But the Hebrew word *vayei'achazu* in the above-quoted verse, which we have translated "**they took hold of it also translates, they were held by it.**" Both interpretations are cited by our sages: Rashi translates *vayei'achazu* as related to the word *achuzah*, "land holding" and "homestead." The Midrash interprets it to imply that, "The land held them and grasped them ... like a man who is force fully held."

THE PARADOX OF GALUT

A similar paradox describes Jacob's feelings toward his new home. On the one hand, Jacob's seventeen years in Egypt are considered to have been the best years of his life.⁽³⁾ On the other hand, the *Haggadah* states that Jacob descended to Egypt, "forced by the divine command."

The *Haggadah's* statement seems inconsistent with our sages' depiction of Jacob as a *merkavah* ("chariot" or "vehicle") of the divine will, whose "every limb was totally removed from physical concerns and served only as a vehicle to carry out G-d's will every moment of his life"⁽⁴⁾ Would a *merkavah* feel "forced" to fulfill a divine command?

In truth, however, it was because Jacob was so absolutely attuned to the divine will that he felt forced into his exile in Egypt. For this is what G-d wants of us: that **we should be fully invested in the endeavor to develop our *galut* environment, and at the same time experience a perpetual desire to escape it.**

This duality defines our attitude toward *galut*. On the one hand, we know that no matter how hospitable our host-country may be, and no matter how we may flourish, materially and spiritually, on foreign soil, *galut* is a prison. We know that *galut* dims our spiritual vision, hinders our national mission, and compromises our connection with G-d. For only as a nation dwelling on our land, with the Holy Temple as the divine abode in

our midst, can we perceive the divine presence in the world, fully realize our role as "a light unto the nations,"⁽⁵⁾ and fully implement all the *mitzvot* of the Torah—the lifeblood of our relationship with G-d.

But we also know that we are in *galut* for a purpose. We know that **we have been dispersed throughout the world in order to reach and influence the whole of humanity.** We know that it is only through the wanderings and tribulations of *galut* that we access and redeem the "sparks of holiness"—those pinpoints of divine potential which lie scattered in the most forsaken corners of the globe.⁽⁶⁾

So *galut* is an *achuzah* in both senses of the word: a homestead to develop and a prison we must perpetually seek to escape. Indeed, it can only be the one if it is also the other. **If we relate to *galut* solely as a prison, we will fail to properly utilize the tremendous opportunities it holds. But if we grow comfortable in this alien environment, we risk becoming part of it; and if we become part of the *galut* reality, G-d forbid, we could no more succeed in our efforts to develop and elevate it than the person who tries to lift himself up by pulling upward on the top of his own head.**

So when Jacob led the seventy members of his household—the seventy seedlings from which the Jewish nation was to grow—Israel's first exile, he did so as one "forced by the divine command." As a divine "chariot" **Jacob had no will, desire, or striving save the will of G-d.** But Jacob knew that for him to want to go to Egypt would undermine the very purpose of his mission there.

Jacob knew that the secret of Israel's survival in exile is the refusal to become reconciled with it, the refusal to accept it as a state that is normal or acceptable—much less desirable to us. He knew that only those who remain unwilling strangers to *galut* will succeed at mastering it as their "homestead" and exacting from it a bountiful spiritual harvest.

FEAR Vs. PAIN

Therein lies the deeper significance of Rashi's commentary on Genesis 46:2-4, where the Torah recounts G-d's words to Jacob as Jacob prepares to journey to Egypt. The Torah describes how after Jacob stops at Be'er Sheba to bring offerings to G-d,

G-d said to Israel in visions of the night... "Do not be afraid of going down into Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will bring you up again ..."

Citing the words, "Do not be afraid of going down into Egypt," Rashi adds:

Because he was pained over the necessity to leave the [Holy] Land.

The simple meaning of Rashi's words is that they come to explain the cause of Jacob's fears and his need for a divine assurance. On a deeper

1 Yanki Tauber, *The Inside Story*, Genesis, (Meaningful Life Center), pp. 408-411.

level, Rashi is telling us why Jacob need not fear his descent to Egypt: because he was pained over the necessity to leave the Land. Because Jacob experienced pain over the need to leave the holy environment of the Land of Israel—because he would never feel at home on alien soil—this itself was the ultimate guarantee that Jacob and his descendants would survive the Egyptian exile and emerge triumphant from the challenges of *galut*.

(1) See Rashi on Genesis 46:28.

(2) *Midrash Tadshe*, 17.

(3) See *Ba'al HaTurim* on Genesis 47:28.

(4) *Midrash Rabbah*, *Bereishith* 82:6; *Tanya*, chapter 23.

(5) Isaiah 42:6.

(6) See the essay, "The Cosmic Sleep" pp.307-316 above.

1. *For this is what G-d wants of us: that we should be fully invested in the endeavor to develop our galut environment, and at the same time experience a perpetual desire to escape it.*

a. Jeremiah 29:1-7

¹This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon ... ⁴This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵"**Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.** ⁶**Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.** ⁷Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

b. Philippians 1:19-26

¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and God's provision ... what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Messiah will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me, to live is Messiah and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³**I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Messiah, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.** ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that through my being with you again your boasting in Messiah Yeshua will abound on account of me.

2. *But we also know that we are in galut for a purpose. We know that we have been dispersed throughout the world in order to reach and influence the whole of humanity. We know that it is only through the wanderings and tribulations of galut that we access and redeem the "sparks of holiness"—those pinpoints of divine potential which lie scattered in the most forsaken corners of the globe.*

a. Exodus 19:5-6

⁵Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, **"you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."** These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

b. The ideal of the religion of the Rabbi was **the extension of God's Kingship over all the peoples of the world**, and the Jews had a constant reminder of it in the regulation, 'A benediction which contains no reference to the Divine Kingship is no benediction' (Ber. 40b). That means that the benediction had to be introduced by the formula, 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, *King of the Universe*.' It followed from this that the doors could not be bolted against any Gentile who desired admittance from pure motives ...

On the verse, 'And the souls that they had gotten (the Hebrew is literally *made*) in Haran' (Genesis. xii. 5), we are told, **'Abraham made proselytes among the men and Sarah among the women.** Whoever brings a heathen near (to God) and converts him is as though he had created him' (Genesis. R. XXXIX. 14). **One Rabbi even declared: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, did not exile Israel among the nations for any other reason than that proselytes should be added to them' (Pes. 87b).**²

c. Acts 8:1-8

¹And Saul approved of their killing (Stephen). On that day a great persecution broke out against the *k'hilah* in Jerusalem, and **all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.**

²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³But Saul began to destroy the *k'hilah*. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

⁴**Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.** ⁵Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. ⁶When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. ⁷For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. ⁸So there was great joy in that city.

3. *If we relate to galut solely as a prison, we will fail to properly utilize the tremendous opportunities it holds. But if we grow comfortable in this alien environment, we risk becoming part of it; and if we become part of the galut reality, G-d forbid, we could no more succeed in our efforts to develop and elevate it than the person who tries to lift himself up by pulling upward on the top of his own head.*

a. Luke 16:1-13

¹Yeshua told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. ²So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' ³"The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg—⁴I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' ⁵"So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' ⁶"'Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. "The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.' ⁷"Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' ⁸"'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. "He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' ⁹"**The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly.** For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. ¹⁰I tell you, **use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.**

¹⁰"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. ¹¹So **if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?** ¹²And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? ¹³"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

1) This parable ... is regarded **as one of the most, if not the most, perplexing of the parables** of (Yeshua).³

a) (It is) one that shocks the listener **by glorifying the actions of a shady business character**—at the expense of his master's trust, money, and time, the steward watches out for himself.

b) **Does Yeshua promote dishonesty by telling a parable with such a rogue as its hero?**

c) **Why would Yeshua praise the steward for his unethical wheeling and dealing, which costs the master dearly?**

d) Like all parables, the story was designed to excite the imagination with the irony of the master's response.

2) A first reading of the text shows that a very rich man (probably the master of a large estate), discovers that a trusted steward is squandering his wealth (v. 1).

a) Although described as wasteful, the steward has a more grievous shortcoming. **He is not just inefficient—he can't be trusted!**—it is for this reason, that the rich man tells the estate manager to turn in his records and he dismisses him.

b) **The brief period between his fateful meeting with his master and his final departure creates an opportunity for the crafty steward to implement this plan for self-preservation.**

c) He quickly calls in his master's debtors and ingratiates himself to them by reducing their debt—by giving them a generous discount, the unjust steward helped someone other than himself.

d) To be sure, his actions *were motivated by self-interest*—**but by reducing the debt he was helping others.**

3) The main focus of the parable is *money and stewardship*—in the pursuit of God's kingdom, **people must come before money.**

a) The proper stewardship of resources brings help to others—**When God is one's master, money becomes a tool for assisting those in need**—the steward was accumulating wealth exclusively for himself—and not sharing it with others.

b) The "people of this world" (lit., "sons [*or* children] of this age") (v. 8) **are the more faithful stewards because of their commercial and social interaction with one another.**

c) **The application not only reveals a negative parody against the communal wealth of the Essenes⁴**—they kept their money in their own bank and harbored a sectarian hatred for outsiders and their unrighteous "mammon."

³ Brad H. Young, *The Parables, Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, (Hendrickson Publishers), pp. 232-248.

⁴ A Jewish sect active in Israel from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE. They formed small monastic communities whose members strictly observed the laws of Moses and the Sabbath and held their property in common. They withdrew from society, avoiding temple worship in Jerusalem and supporting themselves by manual labor. They usually excluded women. It is likely that the Dead Sea Scrolls were composed, copied, or collected by the Essenes.

- d) Faithful stewardship of financial resources can take place only with and among people—**active involvement with the needs of others is essential—financial resources should be put to work for social reform that benefits all.**
- 4) This colorful story (which is difficult to understand apart from its original context), reveals rich Semitic imagery.
- a) The characters of **a wealthy, magnanimous landowner** and **the rascal**, who plays the leading role of the drama, are quite typical of Gospel and rabbinic parables—country living and the economics of farm management were well known to the common people.
 - b) It is probable that the steward reduced the debts of tenant farmers, who were required to pay a portion of their harvest in exchange for the use of good farming land.
 - c) The steward supervised the deals involving land-leasing, collecting produce, keeping records, receiving income, and paying out disbursements—as an agent of a wealthy landowner, the steward received both a salary and a commission **as well as kickbacks from grateful renters who recognized his authority and appreciated his favors.**
 - d) Although the steward is portrayed as “wasting his (master’s) possessions” (v. 1), his final action may actually have been legitimate in the eyes of the debtors, even if it was unethical and unjust—**he may have been canceling his own sizable commission**, which had been calculated into the amounts owed to his master.
- 5) When called to “account (for his) management” (v. 2), the steward is silent!—the audience would anticipate a loud and vocal defense—an attempt to save his job.
- a) The steward’s **“silence is supremely significant** in the Oriental context. The man is indirectly affirming by his silence at least the following: 1) I am guilty; 2) The master knows the truth; he knows I am guilty; 3) This master expects obedience; disobedience brings judgment; and 4) I can’t get my job back by offering a series of excuses.”⁵
 - b) The prospect of disgrace is (also) overwhelming in oriental culture⁶—shame must be avoided, no matter what the cost.
 - c) The words, “I am not strong enough to dig” (v. 3) must have been very humorous for those listening—as they imagined a

well-to-do “white-collar” financial manager—making a meager living harvesting crops in some sun-scorched field.

- d) But even if the steward was “canceling his own sizable commission,” **the whole procedure of discounting the debts would not be considered ethical.**
- 6) In the shame-and-honor culture of the East, the story makes perfect sense.⁷
- a) The master and his steward *both* wanted to avoid shame.
 - b) Such unprecedented generosity on behalf of the rich man would be received with gratitude—he is a wealthy and magnanimous man who can afford the loss and is also willing to demonstrate his benevolence.
 - c) The master knows full well that in the local village a great round of celebration in praise of him has already started—**the master, as the most noble and most generous man that ever rented land in their district.** He has two alternatives.
He can go back to the debtors and explain that **it was all a mistake**, that the steward had been dismissed, and thus his actions were null and void. **But if the master does this now, the villagers’ joy will turn to anger, and he will be cursed for his stinginess.**
Second, he can keep silent, accept the praise that is being showered on him, and allow the clever steward to ride high on the wave of popular enthusiasm. This master *is* a generous man. He did not jail the steward earlier. To be generous is a primary quality of a nobleman of the East. He reflects for a moment and then turns to his steward and says, “You are a very wise fellow.” One of the (Biblical) definitions of “wisdom” is an instinct for self-preservation.⁸
- 7) The questionable financial practices of the dishonest steward in (Yeshua’s) parable recall the policies of the Dead Sea community.
- a) They **confiscated all the financial holdings and personal belongings of their members**, and as **religious isolationists, they kept their money within the sect.**
 - b) They **rejected all business ties with outsiders.**
 - c) The Manual of Discipline⁹ (1QS [Cave 1/Qumran/*Serekh* (rule) *ha-Yachad*]) 1:1-11)

⁵ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Eerdman’s, 1976), p. 97.

⁶ *The Parables*—, p. 239.

⁷ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*—, p. 86-118.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 101-102.

⁹ The Hebrew document written for new members of the Dead Sea Sect.

- Everyone who wishes to join the community must pledge ... to love all the children of light (members of the Essene sect) ... and to **hate all the children of darkness** (everyone outside the Essene sect) ...
- d) The strict separatism of the community was all-encompassing—financial involvement with outsiders was forbidden, except for simple cash purchases.

Manual of Discipline (1QS) V:14-20¹⁰

Likewise, **no man shall consort with him (the outsider)** in regard to his work or property lest he be burdened with the guilt of his sin. **He shall indeed keep away from him all things ... No member of the Community shall follow them in matters of doctrine and justice, or eat or drink anything of theirs, or take anything from them** except for a price (i.e., a payment) ... For all those not reckoned in His Covenant are to be set apart, together with all that is theirs ... **All their deeds are defilement before Him, and all their property unclean.**

The Damascus Document (CD) XIII:14-16¹¹

No member of the Covenant of God (member of Essene sect) shall give or receive anything from the sons of the Pit (all other people) except for payment (i.e., cash). **No man shall form any association for buying and selling without informing the Guardian of the camp and shall act on (his) advice.**¹²

Manual of Discipline (1QS) IX:8-10¹³

As for the property (lit., wealth) of the men of holiness (members of the Essene sect) who walk in perfection, it shall not be merged with that (i.e., the wealth) of the men of injustice (all other people) who have not purified their life by separating themselves from iniquity and walking in the way of perfection.

- e) Of special interest is the terminology used here for money belonging to those outside the Essene fold—the “wealth of the men of injustice” (i.e., the “wealth of unrighteousness” (or wickedness) ... **is a dynamic equivalent to the Greek “worldly wealth” (NIV) or “mammon of unrighteousness” (KJV)** in Luke 16:9.
- f) **For Yeshua, the test of one’s faithfulness is found in the way one uses “worldly wealth”** (Luke 16:11).

- 8) The sharp dualism between light and darkness, holiness and deceit is an expression of sectarian hatred, which also reveals itself in the economic structure of the community.¹⁴
- a) Josephus tells us that members of the community were not allowed to even give presents to their relatives without written consent.¹⁵
- b) The Essenes guarded their community of wealth through strict laws and rigorous supervision.
- c) Borrowing language from the Dead Sea sect, Yeshua cleverly ridiculed their attitude toward money.
- d) Like the Pharisees (and the rabbis after them), Yeshua emphasized almsgiving to alleviate human suffering.¹⁶

b. Money, Yeshua and the Rabbis

- 1) Regarding the proper use of money, (Yeshua) and the rabbis have much in common.¹⁷
- 2) **A person of faith should be characterized by charity and good deeds, which will be rewarded in the world to come.**
- a) Derekh Eretz Zuta (The Way of the Land) 4
Give it to those who need it in this world, in order that you may get the world to come.
- 3) The parable also teaches that God’s grace is unlimited.¹⁸
- a) The master is like God when he allows the release of debts to stand and praises the dishonest steward.
- b) Therefore, the separatism of the Essene community of wealth must be completely rejected.
- c) **Clearly Yeshua wanted his followers to have contact with the people outside his movement. In fact, he was well known for his association with individuals of ill-repute—Yeshua loved them** (Mat 9:9-12; Luk 15:1-7; 19:1-10).
- d) It is only through unfettered personal interaction with people that their needs can be identified and met.
- e) **A generous heart will win friends and enable others to see the grace of God at work in their lives.**

10 Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, (Penguin Press, 1997), pp. 104-105.

11 Ibid., p. 142.

12 Some translations; “by written consent of the guardians.”

13 Ibid., p. 110.

14 *The Parables*—, p. 244.

15 Josephus, *Wars* 2.134.

16 *The Parables*—, p. 244.

17 Ibid.

18 *The Parables*—, p. 247.