

A JOURNEY TO SUCCOTH

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JACOB'S JOURNEY TO SUCCOTH

As Jacob's long-feared confrontation with his older twin Esau materializes, the two brothers meet, embrace, and seemingly restore their loving, fraternal relationship. They then part: Esau heads toward the region of Seir, whereas *Jacob journeyed to Succoth, built a house for himself, and made stalls [suk-kot] for his cattle. That is why the place was called Succoth* (Gen. 33:17).

On reading this verse, we are immediately struck by several difficulties. First, the triple repetition of the word *Succoth* in a single verse calls for our attention. The first and third time *Succoth* appears, it refers to a geographic location; the second time, it describes the structure Jacob built for his cattle. However, when a single word is used three times in the same verse, the Torah drops a hint that the word is laden with special significance.

Moreover, the brief story told in this verse is itself puzzling. In the very next verse we read that Jacob moved to and settled in the outskirts of the city of Shechem. This locates the story of Dinah and Shechem in the next chapter. What is the point of telling us that Jacob spent time in Succoth? From TB *Megillah* 17a we learn that Jacob spent eighteen months there, but nothing of significance appears to have taken place during that time. We are therefore bound to wonder why the Torah goes into detail about Jacob building a house for himself and stalls for his cattle. What could possibly be so important about these structures?

JACOB'S QUEST FOR RECONCILIATION

As mentioned, the story of Jacob's journey to Succoth follows the lengthier narrative of Jacob's encounter with his brother Esau. Many years earlier, one recalls, Jacob disguised himself as Esau at his mother's behest and approached his elderly, visually-impaired father in order to receive the blessing that was in-tended for Esau. When Esau learned what had happened, he swore to take revenge on his younger twin, prompting Rebekah to send Jacob far away to Laban in Paddan-aram, where he would be safe from Esau's vengeance. Twenty years later, as Jacob makes his way back home, he sends

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a message of reconciliation to Esau and the messengers return with the news that Esau is fast approaching with an army of four hundred men. Jacob is frightened, but in the end the two brothers reunite peacefully, embrace, and then take leave of each other.

A close reading of this narrative reveals numerous parallels and references to the story of the stolen blessing. Isaac's blessing of Jacob included the promise of power and dominion over his brother: *Peoples shall serve you, and nations bow down to you. You shall be lord over your brothers, and the sons of your mother shall bow down before you* (Gen. 27:29). When addressing Esau in advance of and during their encounter, Jacob repeatedly refers to himself as Esau's *servant* and to Esau as his *lord* (or *master*). For example: *To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob* (32:5) . . . *I send this message to my lord* (32:6). It appears that Jacob wishes to impress upon Esau that he disregards his father's blessing, and that he sees himself as Esau's servant rather than his master. This is further emphasized when Jacob *bowed low to the ground seven times until he was near his brother* (33:3).¹

Furthermore, in describing Jacob's encounter with Esau, the Torah emphasizes the verb *n-g-sh* – "approach": *Va-tiggashna ha-shefahot* . . . *va-tiggash gam Le'ah* . . . *ve-ahar niggash Yosef* (33:6-7). This same verb figures prominently in the narrative of Jacob's deceiving his brother: *geshah na va-amushekha* . . . *va-yiggash Ya'akov el Yitshak* . . . *haggishah li ve-okhelah* . . . *va-yaggesh lo* . . . *geshah na* . . . *va-yiggash va-yishak lo* . . . (27:21-27).

Likewise, Esau falls on Jacob's neck and kisses him (Gen. 33:4), an act that recalls Isaac kissing Jacob before he gave him his blessing (Gen. 27:27), as well as Jacob's neck covered with goatskins so that it would feel hairy like Esau's (27:16). When they meet, Jacob implores Esau to accept the gifts that he has sent, begging him to *please take my blessing* (33:11). He refers to the gift as a "blessing," as if to say that it should be accepted in lieu of the *berakhah* which he had taken from Esau many years earlier. He also emphasizes his wish that the gift be taken *from my hand* (33:10), a reference to the *hands of Esau* that Jacob had counterfeited in order to appropriate the blessing (27:22).²

We might also catch a glimpse of Jacob's intent by carefully examining the appeasement gifts he sends to Esau ahead of their encounter. The Torah (32:14) relates that Jacob sent Esau several groups of animals, 550 in all. The

procession of gifts begins with *200 she-goats (izzim) and 20 he-goats; 200 ewes and 20 rams* (32:15). It may be that the goats are offered first because Jacob wishes to emphasize the *izzim* – the choice kids from which his mother prepared a savory dish for his father that Jacob brought when, disguised as Esau, he came to receive Isaac's blessing (27:9-10). Once again, Jacob seeks to draw Esau's attention to his remorse for the stolen blessing in the hope of repairing the relationship that was strained on account of that incident.

Furthermore, the very fact that all the gifts Jacob offers to his brother are livestock seems to proclaim: "See, I have only been successful as a shepherd; I haven't gained any real advantage from the blessings of Isaac, *Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and wine* [Gen. 27:28]."

In short, Jacob is on a quest here for reconciliation, to make amends for having tricked his brother out of the blessings. The many references to that episode underscore the fact that Jacob, haunted by guilt, now begs Esau's forgiveness.

SEEKING GOD'S FORGIVENESS

As Jews are reminded each year before and during the High Holiday season, two elements are necessary for repentance – making amends to those whom one has wronged and atoning for one's sins against God. From the story of Jacob's experiences after his deception of Esau we can see that he not only craves reconciliation with his brother, but also does penance before God.

When Jacob flees from Esau after stealing the blessings, he receives a vision in which God promises, *I am with you and will protect you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land* (Gen. 28:15). Upon awakening from his prophetic dream, Jacob makes a vow, signifying an "agreement" with God. In articulating the terms of this agreement, he adds two elements that the Lord has not mentioned previously: *If God will be with me and protect me on this journey I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return peacefully to my father's house...* (Gen. 28:20-21).

First, Jacob stipulates that God must not only protect him – as He promised in the dream – but supply him with food and clothing as well. This extra condition is probably a not-so-subtle reference to the birthright transfer in which

Jacob gave Esau bread (25:34); that led to the blessings episode in which he served his

father with bread (Gen. 27:17) after donning Esau's clothes as part of his disguise (27:15). Jacob implores God to forgive him for stealing the blessings and to continue granting him adequate supplies of bread and clothing, despite his use of bread and clothing to deceive his father.³

Secondly, Jacob wants to make sure that God will not only bring him back to Canaan, as promised in the dream, but will return him *peacefully* to [his] *father's house*. He does not simply wish to return; he wants his troubled family situation to be fully resolved. Jacob longs for a return to the peaceful family life he enjoyed before the blessings episode, and this desire forms an integral part of the "contract" he now enters into with the Almighty.

It is also significant that Jacob refers to God as *Elohim*, the divine name connoting His attribute of justice (*middat ha-din*). Previously, in Jacob's dream (Gen. 28:13), God had revealed Himself as *Hashem* (the tetragrammaton YHWH), invoking His attribute of compassion (*middat ha-rah̄amim*). Yet Jacob, in his quest for atonement, insists on receiving God's promise in the name of *Elohim*, through the attribute of justice. He seeks full absolution for his wrongdoing.

JACOB'S YOM KIPPUR

Developing this analysis one step further, Jacob's experiences may be said to constitute his personal "Yom Kippur", the process he undergoes in his quest for atonement (*kapparah*) and forgiveness. Jacob says so almost explicitly in the propitiatory message he delivers to Esau through his envoys: *You shall say: 'Your servant Jacob is also right behind us.' For he reasoned, 'I shall gain atonement from him through the gift sent ahead of me'* (Gen. 32:21). Jacob clearly refers here to his desire for a full expiation of his wrongdoing – triggering in our minds an obvious association with Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement.

During this process, Jacob also fulfills one of the basic requirements of repentance – acknowledging his true self identity and values. On his way to meet Esau, we recall, Jacob is attacked by a mysterious man (whom the Rabbis identified as an angel); and when Jacob finally prevails over the assailant, who begs to be released, Jacob demands a blessing. The man, surprisingly

enough, asks Jacob for his name, to which he replies, *Jacob* (32:28). This is not the first time Jacob has been asked to identify himself when he demanded a blessing. When Jacob approached his father disguised as Esau, Isaac asked him, *Who are you, my son?* (Gen. 27:18), and Jacob deviously replied, *I am Esau, your firstborn*. While the *midrashim* and some commentators endeavor to justify Jacob's untruthful response by finding ways of rereading these three words, we cannot overlook the straightforward reading of the text, according to which he lied to his father. Now, twenty years later, Jacob feels secure recognizing who he really is. Now, once again, he finds himself in a situation where he must identify himself to receive a blessing. The avowal of his true name before he receives this blessing provides a narrative annulment of his previous deception.

FROM YOM KIPPUR TO SUCCOTH

By the time Jacob parts from Esau, his "Day of Atonement" is complete. He has become reconciled with his brother, correcting his mistake. The next step is *Jacob journeyed to Succoth*. After experiencing Yom Kippur, he proceeds to establishing Sukkot.

As mentioned at the outset, Jacob built a house – *va-yiven lo bayit*. This is commonly understood to mean that Jacob built a home for himself. However, the word *lo* could refer not to Jacob himself, but rather to the Almighty, meaning that Jacob built a house for God. The Lord had indeed brought him safely home and enabled him to achieve reconciliation with his brother. In the spirit of *ma'aseh avot siman le-vanim*, "the good deeds of parents are a good omen for their children," Jacob builds a temporary structure (*sukkah*) shortly after his "Yom Kippur," establishing the precedent followed by his descendants. The Israelites, having atoned for the Golden Calf on Yom Kippur, proceeded to construct the *Mishkan*, the portable Sanctuary or Tabernacle used until the Temple was built.

Year by year, Jews also proceed directly from the repentance and atonement of Yom Kippur to the temporary construction of Sukkot – a place of communion with the Almighty similar to the *Mishkan*.⁴

NOTES

1. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 229.
2. Similarly, Gad Dishy writes about the hands and the *minḥati/birkhati* terminology of the gifts representing a restitution for the stolen blessing: Gad Dishy, *Jacob's Family Dynamics: Climbing the Rungs of the Ladder* (New York: Devora, 2010) pp. 139-140. See also Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996) p. 186.
3. Shmuel Klitsner also connects the bread and clothing request as a direct highlight of the betrayal scene: S. Klitsner, *Wrestling Jacob: Deception, Identity, and Freudian Slips in Genesis* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2006) pp. 85-6.
4. R. Jacob ben Asher, in his *Tur*, *Orah Hayyim* 417, quotes his brother, R. Judah, who connects each of the patriarchs to one of the three Pilgrim Festivals. On the basis of Genesis 33:17, Jacob is associated with the festival of Sukkot.



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