

In this week's Torah portion, Yaakov returns home after a twenty-year absence, to the land in which he was born, the land promised to his parents and grandparents, the land from which he exiled himself in fear of his brother.

In doing so, Jacob completes a journey that began in the beginning of last week's parashah, Vayeitzei – literally, “he set out.” At the start of that parashah, in Chapter 28, 20-22, after dreaming of a ladder with angels ascending and descending, Jacob had sworn a vow, promising “If God remains with me, and protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return *b'shalom* – “in peace”, or “whole”, to my father's house—Hashem shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You.”

What does it mean to return to a place, *b'shalom* – in peace or wholeness, after 20 years? The medieval commentator Rashi, suggests that *b'shalom* means “perfectly free (שלם) from sin, not having learnt evil from Laban's ways,” a hope that Jacob would be unchanged spiritually by his journeys and experiences.

And contemporary teacher Avivah Zornberg suggests, “his call for integrity throughout his exile is part of his vow, and not – as usually read – part of the conditions he lays down before he will fulfill his vow. On such a reading, Jacob takes a certain responsibility for returning whole, “unspoiled” from his wanderings, and, equally, for closing the circle of his travels by returning to his father's house. He does not merely desire such a return, but sets himself in full intentionality on a course of preserving a certain original integrity.”<sup>1</sup>

In Chapter 35 in this week's parashah, twenty years later, Jacob finally fulfills the actions promised in the vow, building an altar and making a sacrifice at the same

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<sup>1</sup> P 217

spot he had sworn to do so, before he reaches his father's house and sees him before Isaac dies.

But it is an interesting question whether the terms of the vow were fulfilled – this question of whether Jacob's journeys occurred *b'shalom* either from the perspective of the events that Hashem imposed on Jacob, or according to Jacob's own innocence. Jacob does not arrive home until the very end of this week's parashah, and by the time of his return, he has gained and lost a great deal. He has a family and great wealth now, 2 wives, two concubines, 12 sons, one daughter. He has a new name, Yisrael, gained by wrestling with a mysterious character who injures him and blesses him. He has reconciled, at least superficially with his brothers.

But much has been lost: He has been wounded in his wrestling. He has seen his daughter Dina abducted and raped in the city of Shechem, and then seen his sons take a shockingly violent vengeance, and refused to meaningfully intercede in either case, taking to the road afterwards, and the text is unclear whether his daughter is with him. In Chapter 35, as the family travels away from Shechem, they experience two deaths: first Devorah, his mother's nurse, and the midrashim suggest that this is a veiled reference to news of his own mother's death, and then, a few verses later, the death of his beloved wife Rachel.

Yaakov returns to his father's house without having manifested the blessing of primacy over his brother, the blessing for which he deceived and ultimately exiled himself. Yet he fulfils the vow, implying that he feels that he has, in some way returned *b'shalom*.

It cannot mean that he is entirely at peace. He has experienced violence; and he has lost the great love of his life.

Does this mean "unchanged?" – certainly, some aspects of him are unchanged; and that is not necessarily a good thing. He still deceives Esau about his intention

to join him and journey together, and according to midrash, about Dina's existence.

But there are hints of change, in the name he brings home; Yisrael – one who will be able to wrestle with God.

Perhaps returning *b'shalom* is not about being unchanged. Because God forbid that Yaakov would go on such a journey, and not learn anything, not grow. As Rabbi Menachem Mendle of Kotskt taught, "there is nothing so whole as a broken heart."

There are things we all long to return to: times of innocence, times idyll. And perhaps the greatest wholeness we can achieve is in recognizing the impossibility of returning to find ourselves unchanged and the place we left pristine as in our memories. I don't even like how I sometimes regress to teenage behavior when I return to my parents home!

There are the before spaces, and there are the before times. And I think about this as I still hear people ask when we will return to normal. The answer must be *never*. There is no normal we can return to (accessibility, fear). We must envision new ways of creating community, and we cannot do that if we define "returning *b'shalom*" as returning to an earlier state of being, as if we have not experienced what we have experienced.

Better, I think to honor the ways that experience changes us, changes our relationships and our expectations of the universe. It is a profound thing that Yaakov chose to tell the story of a vow fulfilled, both on his part and on Hashem's. It teaches us that, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks taught, human existence is *not a tragedy*: our mortality. Our failures. To be relentlessly, inevitably flawed, as we all are, does not negate the possibility that we are whole. And to be relentlessly, inevitably changed, does not negate the possibility that we might go home *b'shalom*.