

## Vayishlach 5781

### Fear and Panic

Today we close the arc of the story that began two weeks ago with Jacob and Esau.

We know the scene well. Jacob is returning to Canaan, accompanied by his four wives, his children and all of his property. He sends messengers ahead to Esau to announce his arrival, in the hope of smoothing the ground; his messengers return to tell him that Esau is on his way towards Jacob with 400 men in tow. And then the Torah tells us:

Jacob became exceedingly afraid and was distressed. He divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps. (*Gen. 32:8 - this is a more literal translation than the one we have.*)

Let's take a closer look at what is going on inside Jacob.

First, he becomes 'exceedingly afraid' and then we are told he is 'distressed.' Of course, we might think, it makes perfect sense that if we are very afraid we are going to feel distress as well. They are sort of the same thing, surely? Or at the very least, one is going to lead directly to the other.

But our commentators always notice when Torah seems to repeat itself needlessly. If Jacob is afraid, they reason, then *obviously* he would be distressed, we could work that out on our own - so what is Torah trying to tell us by saying something that's apparently redundant?

There are a great many answers offered by the tradition - we do not need to study them in detail this morning. Let's notice, instead, that there are two processes happening here. What if, instead of thinking of them as being a sort of cause and effect, we see them as two different things?

Fear is the state of being afraid. In Jacob's case, it's of something particular - the fact that he has just been told that Esau is actively coming towards him, and very much not alone. Even though the fear is extreme - *vayira me'od* - it is specific.

Distress is different. The Hebrew there is *vayetzer* which means, to cause constriction or even pain. We can think of Jacob's distress as being the consequences of his fear playing out in his mind and in his body. We might even imagine having what we know as a panic attack - a state where his physical reactions to his fear take him over completely. That's what gives us the translation in the Etz Hayyim - *In his anxiety...*

Out of Jacob's panic comes action. The action is to divide. Externally, Jacob is being practical - he divides his household into two groups such that if one goes down, he'll still have the other. But on a psychological level, this speaks to a division inside Jacob - he can no longer meet the situation wholeheartedly. His panic has broken something inside him. And this theme of duality, of Jacob being somehow set against himself, echoes through the rest of the story - him on one side of the Jordan, everyone else on the other; him wrestling all night with a mysterious other; him limping away with part of his physical body broken and the rest intact. We can even look further down the story into next week's parashah and see the divisions Jacob causes in his children as being part of the same pattern.

Could Jacob have avoided this outcome?

In a commentary called the Tiferet Yehonatan, written by the Talmudist, Halachist and Kabbalist Jonathan Eybeschutz (Kraków 1690 - Altona 1764), we find the following commentary on this passage:

Jacob was anxious and worried regarding the sense of fear and weak-heartedness that settled in him. He reasoned: "Sinners in Zion are frightened" (Is. 33:14) – a God-fearer who is whole (sinless) fears nothing.

In commenting on this commentary, Rabbi Jonathan Slater writes: *These teachings reflect the conditioned mind at work. Jacob, faced with an ambiguous situation fraught with potential danger, experienced fear. When that emotion registered in his heart and mind, he reacted a second time – with more fear, or anxiety. He told himself a new story: I must be a sinner; I must not be worthy; I will not merit God's direct intervention. He compounded his level of emotional confusion when he confused what is true ("I am afraid") with what he imagined is the necessary outcome of that truth. He made up a story, which only digs him in deeper.*

Once again, Torah is speaking directly to our lived experience.

If we cast our minds back over the news this week, we see rising figures for the virus; further restrictions; hospitals under pressure; uncertainty; chaos. There is every reason for us to feel fearful as we contemplate the week that is coming. We have every reason to be afraid.

And yet - we may be fearful, but we need not compound our fear into panic. If we can avoid falling into panic, we stand a better chance of not dividing our inner selves and retaining our fullest sense of who we are, what is important in this moment and what we need to do.

Just like any time we try to notice a habit and change it, this is easy to say and very hard to do. Drawing a distinction between fear and panic defeated our ancestor Jacob. But perhaps we can learn from his experience as we read it again this morning that we do have a choice about the stories we tell ourselves.

This week, Hanukkah will begin. We will use one candle to light another so as to begin to drive away the deep darkness of this time of year. Perhaps as we watch our Hanukkiot on Thursday night we will notice anew that the two candles are separate lights.

And even if we are fearful, we might be able to interrupt ourselves before we start telling ourselves stories about outcomes, so that we can meet whatever this week will bring with all of our resources intact.

Shabbat shalom and happy Hanukkah.