

## **Generational Trauma**

### ***Parashat Vayeitzei 5786***

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A couple years ago, Rebecca Glazier and the Little Rock Congregations Study held a clergy summit on race. Among a diverse group of interfaith clergy, I was seated with two Black pastors and a conservative white evangelical. Immediately after the blessing before the meal, the other white man at the table made a disturbing claim. He claimed he had seen a study demonstrating that educational outcomes for Black and white children are indistinguishable if those children are raised in homes with both their fathers and their mothers. The implication is that Black children are harmed by being raised without fathers, and instead by single mothers, grandparents, or aunts. I don't think he even noticed the offensively heteronormative part of his claim.

I was stunned. At a gathering designed to build interracial bonds and understanding, I did not expect to be confronted by a claim that Black Americans are to blame for educational achievement gaps. Fortunately, one of the other men at the table was Rev. George Parks, Jr. He explained the overwhelming generational trauma that disrupts Black families. Nearly five centuries of slavery, peonage, Jim Crow, and enduring racism have left their mark, with Black men cast as brutal aggressors, posing grave danger to white women, while white men regularly raped Black women under their control. Generations of healing, reconciliation, reparation, and equal opportunity will be required before Black families can be expected to mirror those of their white neighbors.

In this week's Torah portion, we are introduced to the trauma of Jewish history. The name of the **פרשה**, **ויצא**, means "he left." "He," in this case, is Yakov, who eventually will be known as Yisrael, standing for the whole Jewish people. He is fleeing out of fear that his brother Eisav wants to kill him for stealing their father's blessing.

Like Yakov before us, Jews throughout history have frequently had to leave. Professors Elsie Stern and Daniel Fisher-Livne, the editors of the forthcoming *New Reform Torah Commentary*, tell us that much of the Torah was written as a response to trauma, authored in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., during and shortly after the first Babylonian exile, the first time that large numbers of our people were forced to flee their homes. Our ancestors would again be exiled from their land by the Romans in the year 70. While a remnant of our people always lived in the Land of Israel, nearly two millennia would pass before the Jewish people would find two seemingly stable homes, one in Israel and the other in North

America. Throughout the intervening centuries, our forebears found themselves repeatedly at the mercy of rulers who tolerated them while Jews could be useful, then returned to persecution and expulsion. That experience shapes an implacably suspicious people who doubt that we may ever truly found a home.

Yakov's discomfort at his departure is dramatized when he lays down for the night, taking *מֵאֲבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם*, "some stones of that place," to fashion a most uncomfortable pillow.<sup>i</sup> Medieval commentators—that is, rabbis in frequently displaced communities—argue about whether Yakov used one stone or several as his pillow. Later, when he awakens, he takes *אֶת-הָאֶבֶן*, "**the** stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a monument,"<sup>ii</sup> which leads several of the commentators to insist that his pillow had been one stone all along.<sup>iii</sup> Rashi, though, imagines both. Yakov first arranges several stones as a barrier to protect himself from wild beasts, but then the stones begin to argue among themselves, each demanding that **it** be the stone on which the righteous Yakov would rest his head. Ultimately, God quiets the rocks by turning them into one big stone.<sup>iv</sup>

I wonder if the stones, as Rashi understands them, might represent the structures that Jews in diaspora assembled to protect themselves from all manner of wild (human) beasts who would assault us across history. Some sought to be useful to the ruling elite in the lands to which they had been dispersed—as moneylenders, for example. Others turned inward, immersing themselves in Torah, seeking to live as God commands, whatever the terrors around them. Some became fervent messianists, believing that God would miraculously restore them to sovereignty in Israel, providing hope but leading some to follow false messiahs into disaster. Virtually every diaspora community would eventually leave once-safe homes that had become dangerous to find pastures they hoped would be greener. These strategies and the communities who pursued them were often at odds with one another, like the disputatious stones of Rashi's imagination.

Now, the squabbling stones have returned with a vengeance—with the Jewish people needing a place to rest its head after being expelled by October 7 and its aftermath from what had been a widely perceived sense of Jewish safety in both Israel and North America. On one extreme, some argue that Judaism is best practiced without the power and armaments of a Jewish state. On the other extreme are those who claim we can only be safe with sovereignty over the whole Land of Israel, cleansed of those they understand to be implacably hostile to the Jewish people, never mind that their history in the land is also ancient. Even between these extremes, too many Jews accuse one another of being complicit with genocide, whether of Jews or of Palestinians. Each is a response to the trauma of Jewish history, albeit differently perceived.

Can the Jewish people be expected to emerge from its generational trauma, when we reasonably ask ourselves:

Can we be secure in America, with resurgent white Christian nationalism that increasingly takes aim at Jewish power, real and imagined?

Can we be secure in America, with growing populations of progressives and Muslims who increasingly take aim at Jewish power, real and imagined?

Can our people be secure in Israel, now more than ever dependent on America, which is reliable for now, but for how long?

When Yakov lies down on that stone or stones, he falls asleep and dreams. A ladder stretches to heaven, angels ascending and descending, and God appears, assuring Yakov that the land he is leaving will nevertheless be his legacy. At the same time, God says: “Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south...Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”<sup>v</sup>

Spreading in all points of the compass cannot refer to Yakov, who only goes east, but to the generations who wrote the Torah as a response to exile. We ought not be surprised, then, that our commentators<sup>vi</sup> understand God’s promise not merely to be to Yakov, but to all the Jewish people. Dispersed to lands both known and unknown to our people’s first exiles, we continue a journey, continually leaving and continually yearning for home, like Yakov before us.

“Home” for our people may not be in a geographical place, not even the Land of Israel. Instead, we may only find home in a future that may feel messianic—when we transcend our generational trauma, with God’s blessing.

- When we are no longer imperiled by hatreds or stereotypes, blood libels or microaggressions, foisted upon us.
- When we can see dangers clearly and rationally, neither enhanced by terrors of the past nor diminished by wishful thinking.
- When לדור ודור, “from generation to generation,” no longer evokes trauma but means only the blessings we witness tonight—transmission of our Torah, our worship, our community, and the music to which they are all set, from generation to generation, with love.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Genesis 28:11.

<sup>ii</sup> Genesis 28:18.

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<sup>iii</sup> For example, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra to Genesis 28:11.

<sup>iv</sup> Rashi on Genesis 28:11, based on *midrash aggadah* Genesis Rabbah 68:11 and Chullin 91b.

<sup>v</sup> Genesis 28:14-15.

<sup>vi</sup> See, for example, Sforno on Genesis 28:15.