

Note: Much of this sheet is based on Nechamah Liebowitz zt"l's gilayon of 5722

The relationship between Yaakov and Esav described in Parashat Vayishlach contains enough ambiguities and complexity for a lifetime of study. Our goal this week is to offer an entree into that study by focusing on the word "vayachatz", "he divided", which appears in 32:8 and 33:1. In 32:8 it refers to Yaakov dividing the people and cattle with him, in 33:1 to dividing his children up by mother.

Question:

1) Why didn't Yaakov divide everything simultaneously?

This question may result from a misunderstanding – Yaakov divides the people and cattle so that half will not meet Esav; he divides the children in order to properly present them to Esav. The real question, then, is

1) Why does he risk exposing all his children to Esav's wrath? Note that Bekhor Shor says that Yaakov divided the children among their mothers so that each mother could pick her children up and flee if necessary.

Here two possibly related facts should be introduced.

- 1) In between the first and second "vayachatz", Yaakov wrestles with, defeats, is blessed by, and is injured by an angel who seems in some way to represent Esav.
- 2) In a possible pun, the first vayachatz is a reaction to Yaakov being afraid, "VaYeera", the second to his seeing, "VaYar".

R. Avraham ben HaRambam offers a variety of approaches.

One) Yaakov wished to keep his children with him as long as possible. This is emotionally powerful, but seems weak in that keeping them with him until the last moment harms their chances of escape. Also, Esav in fact meets them all!

Two) After praying and defeating the angel, Yaakov felt sufficiently confident to reunite his camps. This isn't terribly helpful – if Yaakov divides the children for safety, why does his nerve fail him again at the last minute? If this division isn't for safety, why do we care whether the people and cattle are still divided or not?

Three) Yaakov wished to live or die with his children. This plan has the advantage, not spelled out in 32, of suggesting that the two camps were not equal, but rather that Yaakov was hoping Esav would meet the non-family group and tip his hand by his treatment of them. Furthermore: in 33:8 Esav asks Yaakov the point of the "machaneh", "camp", he had earlier met. This is generally assumed to refer to the "minchah", offering, that Yaakov sends to Esav in 32:14 (although Rashi cites a midrashic interpretation that identifies it as an angelic camp), but in 32:8 Yaakov divides the people and cattle into two "machanot". Maybe Yaakov's plan worked, and he meets Esav rather than fleeing because Esav met the other camp first and did not maltreat it.

Malbim works within the same basic scheme as b, but suggests that Yaakov felt that the injury to his thigh portended danger to his children despite his overall victory, and thus he divided them while reuniting his property. This would fit better if the second "vayachatz" were explicitly the result of fear rather than mere "seeing", but is a beautiful completion of the symbolic structure.

What should be striking about all the above is that it portrays possible changes of mind, deepseated ambivalences, and fundamental uncertainties from Yaakov's perspective – almost all dependent on his (perhaps fluctuating) perception of Esav and Esav's intentions – yet the Torah never offers us a window into Esav's thoughts. We know that twenty years earlier he had planned to kill Yaakov, although only after their father's death, and that he now leaves Yaakov alone.

Questions:

- 1) Are Yaakov's perceptions accurate? Related: What were Esav's intentions? Note that this is the second consecutive parsha in which Yaakov is pursued by an outraged relative, but that, unlike Lavan, Esav has no divinely inspired dream warning him not to touch Yaakov.
- 2) Or does he? We can't know, since the Torah tells us nothing about his experience. Why is Esav left blank to us? Answering this question may require deciding how closely the angel-wrestling should parallel the actual confrontation with Esav. Related: Since Yaakov's children are not harmed, what does the injury Yaakov sustained actually symbolize? Is there another injury that he suffers during the meeting with Esav?
- 3) Underlying question: Had Yaakov made no elaborate plans, but simply met Esav straightforwardly, what would have happened?