



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Vayishlach 5775

December 6, 2014

This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of an interactive text study. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parashah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Try using it as a conversation-starter at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar* Torah.

Introduction

Jacob's life often seems like a soap opera, with one dramatic episode after another. *Parashat Vayishlach* contains many of these moments—the violent nighttime struggle with an unidentified assailant, the tense reunion with his brother Esau who had sought to kill him, the rape of his daughter and his son's vengeful response, and the death of his beloved wife Rachel during childbirth. And yet, in the midst of all of this drama and loss, comes a description of Jacob experiencing peace and wholeness. An examination of this passage prompts us to reflect on wholeness and its opposite, not only for Jacob, but for ourselves and for all of humanity.

Following Jacob's encounter with Esau, the Torah says:

Genesis 33:18

Jacob arrived whole in the city of Shechem which is in the land of Canaan—having come thus from Paddan-aram—and he encamped before the city.

בראשית לג:יח

וַיָּבֵא יַעֲקֹב שְׁלָם עִיר שְׁכֶם אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנַעַן
בְּבֵאוֹ מִפַּדָּן אֶרֶם וַיַּחַן אֶת פְּנֵי הָעִיר:

- What do you think it means that Jacob arrived “whole” in the city of Shechem?
- What had previously happened to Jacob that might have made him not whole and what might have happened to him recently that restored his wholeness?

Rashi quotes the Talmud and *midrash* in order to explain what it means that Jacob came whole to Shechem:

Rashi on Genesis 33:18

Unimpaired in his body, for he was cured of his limp (from fighting the stranger in the night). Whole with his money, for he did not lose anything from all of the gifts that he had given Esau. Whole with his Torah, for he had not forgotten his studies while in Laban's house.

רש"י בראשית לג:יח

שלם בגופו, שנתרפא מצליעתו. שלם בממונו,
שלא חסר כלום מכל אותו דורון. שלם בתורתו,
שלא שכח תלמודו בבית לבן:

- According to Rashi's interpretation, what had threatened Jacob's wholeness and in what ways is he now whole?
- Are there other ways—besides physically, financially/materially and intellectually—to be whole? If so, what are they?
- What do you think are the necessary preconditions for people to achieve wholeness?
- In what ways are you whole and in what ways are you not whole?
- When you think about others in your community and in the world, in what ways are they whole and in what ways are they not whole?

One interpretation of wholeness connotes a state of completeness in which nothing is lacking. In this sense, the opposite of wholeness is a state of poverty or deprivation. Just as financial or material wealth was only one component of Jacob's "wholeness," lack of such wealth is only one component of contemporary poverty. Human rights scholar Peter Uvin explains:

Peter Uvin, *Human Rights and Development*, page 123

Robert Chambers, father of the rapid, participatory, rural appraisal approach to development research . . . argued that from the point of view of the poor, what he calls the condition of *deprivation* is about much more than lack of income. Deprivation is characterized by social inferiority, isolation, physical weakness, vulnerability, seasonal deprivation, powerlessness, and humiliation. And the World Bank (2000), after a process of interviewing thousands of poor people worldwide, now describes poverty as multidimensional: poverty, as the poor themselves see it, goes far beyond low income, encompassing also a lack of access to health and education, as well as vulnerability, voicelessness, and powerlessness. Effective poverty alleviation requires that each of these dimensions be addressed.

- In what ways are poverty and deprivation about "much more than lack of income"? How does this text change or inform your understanding of poverty?
- Based on the descriptions of deprivation in this text, what is necessary to achieve wholeness?
- In this text, poor people themselves define poverty and deprivation. Why might it be important for people to self-define their poverty—and, conversely, their wholeness?

Conclusion

The Torah's description of Jacob as being "whole" is not a unique observation but a repetition of Jacob's own statement of completeness made several verses earlier to his brother Esau: "Please accept my present which has been brought to you, for God has favored me and I have everything" (Genesis 33:11). Similarly, as the text from Peter Uvin above indicates, definitions of poverty and deprivation should derive from the people experiencing those conditions. May we listen to the voices of those around the world living in poverty and support their efforts so that we may all soon declare ourselves to be whole.

This week's Dvar Tzedek was originally published in 2012.