



Visits During Illness: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Vayishlah*

Genesis 32:4 – 36:43

One of the difficult aspects of enduring illness, grief, and other life challenges is not being “seen” in the depths of the accompanying emotional pain. It can be hard to deal with anguish when we encounter it and we may consciously or subconsciously try to find ways to create a boundary of separation between ourselves and someone else’s suffering. This avoidance may take the form of, for example, seemingly innocuous statements such as: you don’t seem depressed to me, you don’t look sick, I’m sure things will get better, we all have to die, you have other children, they are in a better place now, look for the light at the end of the tunnel, you can get another dog, etc. Undoubtedly there are a number of clichés each of us has encountered or even used to gloss over a difficult situation. When we are on the receiving end of such statements during one of the more challenging times of our lives we realize, at best, just how empty such reassurances are, and at worst how wounding and isolating they can be.

This week’s parsha, *Vayishlach*, is rife with personal and communal tragedies: the rape of Dinah, communal slaughter, Rachel’s death during childbirth, and the death of Isaac. The portion, and in fact the biblical text in its entirety, reflects an ethos common to many tribal cultures as well as early societies in making no pretense about harsh realities. The Bible is criticized for the cruelty it portrays, but I think it should also be credited for acknowledging and understanding the immediacy of human experience that is too often buffered against by a veneer of sanguinity in the West.

In the face of personal challenges, or even the kinds of suffering described in *Vayishlach*, the task, I believe, is to recognize a person’s situation before we even think about words of encouragement—to first “see” the person for where and who he or she is, before we consider imposing our agenda of where and who we want him or her to be. This can take the form of just sitting in silence with someone and reflecting back the sentiments he or she has expressed to describe his or her own condition: sad, hopeless, wanting to die, afraid, or scared. It’s hard to venture into that territory, particularly if it concerns someone for whom we care. We don’t want that individual to be scared or afraid and our first inclination is to shoo away those feelings. But when we sweep aside expressions of consternation or apprehension, we also risk losing moments when profound connection and meaningful conversation can take place. Additionally, the fear can be our own: we ourselves don’t want to enter that dark place. But when someone is in that dark place, that is precisely the point in which true companionship and substantive understanding is needed the most. To deny others this recognition is to deny their and our own full humanity.

A Talmudic story well illustrates the point that, when dealing with someone in difficulty, it is important to first acknowledge what is crying out from the soul before we even consider promoting our own agenda for them. The account tells of Rabbi Yoḥanan and Resh Lakish who were scholars and close friends and known for their *halakhic*, or Jewish legal, debates. Resh Lakish was particularly adept at presenting numerous

incisive arguments to challenge and help clarify Rabbi Yoḥanan's views. It came to pass that Resh Lakish died after a falling out between the two, and Yoḥanan consequently became regretful and "knew no end to his grief." Some rabbinic colleagues, in order to assuage Rabbi Yoḥanan's grief, sent a sharp *halakhic* scholar named Elazar ben Pedat as a substitute for Resh Lakish. Elazar ben Pedat of course failed in this endeavor and we subsequently learn that Rabbi Yoḥanan "screamed until he lost his mind." The tale communicates by implication that not only did the depth of Rabbi Yoḥanan's grief remain unacknowledged in this case, but the rabbis were naïve in thinking they could fix his pain by simply replacing Resh Lakish with someone else. In this narrative no one attempted to discern what the loss meant to Yoḥanan; rather the rabbis assumed they knew what Yoḥanan needed. The authors of the passage recognized that the rabbis' agenda simply served to drive Yoḥanan even further into despair, to the point, we are told, at which he too soon died.

It is perhaps instructive to remind ourselves of something fundamental and essentially human: we have the capacity to meet others where they are in their pain. It is so basic and reflexive, I think, to the cultures of the Bible that it doesn't even need explicit mention in the text. The anguish and pain is present -- exposed, unfiltered and raw -- and meant to be experienced in its immediacy by the reader. The rabbis in the Talmudic story are, however, apparently remonstrated for having lost sight of that innate capacity to "see" people in their actual place of distress. It is a quality of service that we, to an even greater degree, forget in our own society; yet, our traditional texts remind us of the need and our ability to be present with the emotions of others, however difficult the pain may be.

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