

God's Providence in Good Times and Bad: Thoughts for Parashat Vayishlah, December 1, 2012

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In this week's Torah portion, we learn that Jacob was afraid when he learned that Esau was coming toward him with a force of 400 men. Jacob prayed to God and reminded Him of His promise: "I will surely do good for you and make your descendants as the sand of the sea which cannot be numbered for multitude" (Bereishith 32:13). Jacob's fear of Esau was counterbalanced by God's promise to look after Jacob.

The Torah portion then goes on to describe Jacob's mysterious battle with an angel, at which time his name is changed to Israel. This battle reflects Jacob's anxieties and fears. Yet, later in the parasha, Jacob tells his household that they will be moving to Beth El where he planned to build an altar to the Almighty "who answered me in the day of my distress, and was with me on the way I traveled" (35:3). Jacob seems comforted by God's protective providence.

Much later in life, when Jacob and family come to Egypt to be re-united with Joseph, Jacob tells Pharaoh "few and evil have been the days of the years of my life," (47:8) implying that his life has been plagued by one disaster after another. Yet, at the very end of his life, he blesses his grandsons Menashe and Ephraim and praises God "who has been my Shepherd all my life long unto this day" (48:15).

Throughout his life, Jacob faced difficulties and setbacks. He suffered exile from his parents' home; he was tricked again and again by his father in law, Lavan; he feared confrontation with his brother, Esau; his daughter Dinah was raped, and her brothers took revenge by murdering the criminal and his men; he lost his beloved son Joseph for a long period of time until finally reuniting with him. When he told Pharaoh that the days of his life had been filled with evil, he was giving a somber review of his many sufferings.

Yet, Jacob repeatedly thanked the Lord for having watched over him and protected him from all evil. Even as he was uttering his last words to his children, Jacob called out: “I wait for Your salvation, O Lord” (49:18).

Jacob’s various statements reflect fluctuations in his physical and spiritual conditions. He sometimes felt God’s providence more intensely; and sometimes he felt that God had been more remote. He described his life as having been spared of all evil due to God’s being his Shepherd; and he also described his life as being filled with one evil after another.

In reading the Torah’s account of Jacob’s life, we realize that faith is not static. Feelings of God’s closeness are influenced by the external conditions of life. Yet, in spite of fluctuations in attitude, Jacob’s faith remained unshaken. Although he may have shown signs of fear in the midst of crises, he was able to sense God’s providence when he got past the crises and was able to look back on them. Jacob was able to perceive God’s loving presence once he got past the crisis mode.

The following story teaches something important about faith and providence.

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed that he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints on the sand: one belonging to him and the other to the Lord. When the last scene had flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints and he noticed only one set.

He also noticed that this happened during the lowest and saddest times of his life. This bothered him and he questioned the Lord. 'Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you would walk all the way with me, but I noticed that during the most troublesome times of my life there was only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed you most, you deserted me.'

The Lord replied, 'My precious child, I love you and would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, those were the times when I carried you in my arms.'

Jacob ultimately realized that God was always with him. Especially at times of crisis and duress, when God’s presence might have seemed less near, God was with him, carrying him in His arms.

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