

Desert Rainbows

lesson on Parashah 8: *Vayishlach*

by Zahar Oriyan (Kevin Phipps)

I just came from the land of unending sun. I never thought I'd actually get tired of sunny days, but something about almost 70 straight days of hot, bright sun, made me ready for something else. Even the cold, dreariness here is better for something different. Being a weatherman in middle east is probably one of the easiest jobs in the world.

There was one day, however, that was different, even if it was for just a short time. It was my day off and I was in a lounge playing darts. When I was done, I left the building to feel something wet falling on my face. It was rain. Normally I don't like rain all that much, but seeing and feeling that rain after about a month and a half of straight, hot sun was a refreshing surprise. The sun was still there too, but behind a cloud. After it peeked out from the cloud a faint rainbow could be seen in the desert sky.

Who would ever expect to see a rainbow in a desert? Who would ever expect God to use a deceiver and manipulator like Ya'akov to do His will? Yet, before he was even born, God had chosen to use Ya'akov and not his brother Esav to be the father of the sons of the twelve tribes of Isra'el. His very name means "heel grabber", or "supplanter", which means to supercede or take the place of by force or treachery. In the stories of Ya'akov and his tricking his brother out of his birthright for a bowl of soup, and tricking his father into giving him the blessing meant for Esav, we end up feeling sorry for Esav, yet Ya'akov is the one "chosen" by God. Then we end up feeling bad for Leah, who shows herself to be more Godly than her more beautiful younger sister, yet it is Rachel that Ya'akov chooses. When Ya'akov gets tricked by Lavon, we partly feel good that perhaps Ya'akov is getting a taste of his own treachery. Yet, again, through this he is the one who will later bring about the nation of God.

Why would God do this? Perhaps, in His omniscience, God knew how Ya'akov would end up, and that in the end he would prove to be the better leader of God's people. Despite his character problems, he does marry within the family, and it is Jewish tradition that he studied a pre-Mosaic form of Torah. We see Esav marrying women from the pagan nations, showing his departure from the ways of God. This is speculation, however. In reality, the best answer to why God chose Ya'akov and not Esav is, "I don't know." It seems natural for us to try to wrap our finite little minds around the ways of God. However, His ways are not our ways, and if they were, He would cease to be God, wouldn't He.

We read Scripture and think we know God enough to expect what decisions He would make in given circumstances and how we can expect Him to act in certain circumstances. What we don't realize is that what we know of God is the limited information He has

chosen to reveal to us in His Word. He is an infinite God who can do anything He chooses, and we are His finite servants, only beginning to know the God who created us.

We sometimes ask for certain blessings and fail to receive them, yet at times receive blessing we don't even ask for. We see amazing miracles in some places in the world, while others suffer great tragedy, leading us to wonder if God isn't paying attention or doesn't care. Lazarus was raised from the dead, but how many other people died that day, never to return to the land of the living. Just like King Shlomo, we sometimes see righteous people suffering while wicked people flourish. With God, it becomes important to expect the unexpected, and continue to see Him as God despite the things that don't make sense.

I am glad God does things that are unexpected. I grew up in a Christian family. I have always been an artist with virtually no interest, much less skill in mechanics. I grew up mostly in New Jersey, finishing of my high school education in Grand Rapids, Michigan at a Christian school. During that senior year of high school, I lost some good friends, one of which was a girlfriend that was very special to me. I had aspirations to join the Air Force instead of going to college. Then I was told I had Chron's disease, which put an end to that dream. I remember a night, at a youth conference, when I went off on my own and looking ahead at my future was like looking at a dark bottomless chasm. I had no idea what God was going to do with my life, why I had experienced some of the heartaches I had experienced, or where I was to go from there. If someone had come to me and told me that 17 years from that time, I would be living in Spokane, Washington as a Messianic Jewish Believer, getting up in front of people every couple of weeks to teach Torah, I would have a wife and four kids and a dog and a cat, and I would at this point have just returned from my fourth trip overseas as an aircraft mechanic in the Air Force, the Chron's disease mysteriously disappearing sometime after the diagnosis, I would have wanted to know what that person was smoking and if I could have some. However, instead of turning to drugs or something else destructive, I told God to take my life and do something with it. He did the rest.

There is a sense in which that night I wrestled with God, and prevailed. Ya'akov did the same. The result was a name change. Whenever God changes someone's name in the Bible, the old name refers to a human description of the person, such as, "heel grabber". The new name relates to God's divine calling upon that person. Ya'akov's name became Isra'el. This name means, "he will reign as God" or "he will reign with God". I don't see this name as referring to Ya'akov, but one who would someday come from His seed.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."
[Yochanan/John 1:1]

This man who had cheated his brother out of his birthright, now was given the task, along

with all would would come after him, of pointing to and bringing about the One who would reign as God. He and they would be called Isra'el for doing so. Who would expect it? Of course, who would expect that the future Messiah that his life would point to would come to earth as a baby, born in a sukkah, of a virgin, heal the sick, walk on water, feed and teach the multitudes, then have some of those same people demand that He be killed on an execution stake as a criminal, then three days later rise from the dead, saving all those who would believe in Him from eternal death in Sheol? Many didn't, but some did, and because of them, and the continued work of God to build His Kingdom, we are here today.

From time to time I have the joy of putting together one of those pieces of furniture that comes in a hundred pieces and stuffed in the smallest box possible, weighing about 500 pounds. I know that if I just get to it I can get it done in about 3 or 4 hours. However, usually I get my son come to me wanting to help. Initial inclination is to say no because it will take longer to do, and I have to plan around his inabilities. He might also lose something, further delaying getting the job done. If all I was concerned about was getting the job done, I would say no, but usually that is not the focus. I know it is important for my son to spend time with me and learn from me. I also love my son and desire to spend time with him. As a result, I let him help me. It may take a little longer, and my strategy for getting the furniture built is different, but eventually it gets done. When it does, we both can say we did it, not just me.

I think this is much the way God operates. He has his will, but desires to include His people in it. He knows if we spend time with Him, we will learn to be more like Him, and walk in His ways. God is able to work around the sins of humanity and the world to still accomplish His will. He can do that because He is God and He loves us. This is how He can use a person like Ya'akov to bring about His nation. Despite his personality and deceptions, the twelve sons were born which became the leaders of the twelve tribes of Isra'el. God's will was accomplished and Ya'akov became Isra'el because God included him in the work. In all the work God is doing in the world, He certainly could do it without His people, but where would that leave us?

There is a word of caution here, however. Just because God can use us despite our sin, doesn't mean we can continue in it. The point is that in joining God in His work, we learn to be more like Him. We have plenty of examples from Scripture of God not using someone or His use being limited because of sin. Moshe led God's people out of Egypt, but was not able to enter the Promised Land because of sin. David was not able to build the temple because of his sin, though he was still a king, writer of most of the Psalms, and a man after God's own heart. Yonah ended up joining God in the work He wanted to do in Nineveh, but could have saved himself becoming whale vomit if he hadn't tried to go against God first. The same is with us. Just as God desires for us to be with Him, despite our sin, because He loves us, so we need to do all we can to walk in His ways because of our love for Him.

Sometimes God can be as unpredictable as life itself. He is a trustworthy God, be He is King and has a will of His own. We are only His servants. Whatever requests or expectations we have of Him are considered against and alongside His will and plan for our lives and the world. Our faith in God must be constant, just as our praise and love for Him. At times He leads us to dark valleys, and we don't understand why, but we must continue to follow Him. If we do, we can be confident that in time, God will do things in and through our lives which we could never have dreamed. He will show us things we never though we would see. While we are going through valleys, we have to know that eventually our feet will stand upon mountains if we continue to follow Him. He has promised us this in His Word. We can know this too, because with God, success and joy are not dependent on us. The work is not ours, it is God's. It is the very fact that God is the one in control that things happen we do not expect. However, if we respond with faith regardless of what God's surprises for us are, we are guaranteed success in all we do, simply because it is God's work and not ours. It is through the unexpected events of our life that our relationship with God grows, and as it grows, God shows us desert rainbows and much more, showing us more and more how He is our King.

“So I will remind myself of Yah's doings; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will meditate on your work and think about what you have done. God, your way is in holiness. What god is as great as God? You are the God who does wonders, you revealed your strength to the peoples. With your arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Ya'akov and Yosef.”

[Tehellim/Psalms 77:11-15]