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Parshat Vayechi: Belligerent Prayer

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Class of 2021

Before Yosef was born and his mother longed to be a mother, Yaakov rebuffs his beloved but barren wife, Rachel, and her cry for children, by saying הֲתַחַת אֱלֹקִים אָנִי, *Hatachat Elokim Anochi? Can I take the place of God? [who has denied you fruit of the womb?].* (Bereishit 30:2) And now in *parshat Vayechi*, in this final chapter of *Bereishit*, Yosef, whose father did not pray for his son's birth, but was pained by his disappearance, echoes those very words to his brothers. The brothers fear that now that Yaakov has died, Yosef will avenge them for their mistreatment and his brothers throw themselves before him willing to be his servants, if he will spare them. And Yosef unknowingly repeats his father's words in reassuring his brothers: הֲתַחַת אֱלֹקִים אָנִי, *Hatachat Elokim Ani? Can I take the place of God?*

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף אַל־תִּירָאוּ כִּי הֲתַחַת אֱלֹקִים
אָנִי: וְאַתֶּם חֲשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה אֱלֹקִים חָשְׁבָהּ
לְטֹבָה לְמַעַן עֲשֹׂה כַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְהַחֲיֹת עַם־רָב:
(בראשית נ: יט–כ)

But Joseph said to them, "Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. (Bereishit 50:19-20)

Though in both cases, *Hatachat Elokim Anochi, Can I take the place of God?* is an evasive response and dismisses the concern expressed, their spoken context is so different. Uttered by Yaakov to Rachel, the words seem heartless and cruel; from Yosef to his brothers, these words are kind and restorative.

The *midrash*ic critique of Yaakov's scornful remark links these two narratives, though the midrash is not explicitly based on the literary repetition of *Hatachat Elokim Anochi* in both accounts:

אָמַר לוֹ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא כָּךְ עוֹנִים אֶת הַמְּעִיקוֹת,
חַיֶּיךָ שֶׁבָּנֶיךָ עֲתִידִים לַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי בְּנָהּ (בראשית
רבה עא:ז)

Is this how one responds to women in distress? On your life, that your sons will [one day] stand [at mercy of] her son. (Bereshith Rabbah 71:7)

Hatachat Elokim Anochi, Can I take the place of God? is a surprising response from Yaakov, who challenged fate at every turn. Yaakov spent a lifetime manipulating events against their natural course, and strategizing plans of actions: from following Rivka's instructions to acquire the bechora [birthright], to breeding spotted speckled sheep to receive his payment from Lavan, to preparing for his encounter with Esav.

Just as Yaakov did not intervene and pray for Rachel's fertility, Yaakov recedes and plays no active role in the crises involving his children, namely the violation of Dina and Shimon and Levi's genocidal rampage. The Torah says Yaakov waited and kept silent upon hearing that Dina was assaulted, until his sons returned (Bereishit 34:5). Though not recorded in the text, perhaps, Yaakov instructed his sons to rescue Dina, but never encouraged Shimon and Levi's atrocities. Only years later, in our parsha, on his deathbed, does Yaakov strongly rebuke Shimon and Levi for their wrath and violence.

Yet, if we depart from the actual text of Torah and use midrash to supplement our story, Yaakov emerges as the father who directly fights for his children, not by proxy, but himself. And for that we travel to Shechem. Shechem is the tragic nexus of his children's tribulations. Dina's rapist was named Shechem, and the entire people of Shechem were massacred in retaliation by Shimon and Levi. Shechem is the point of departure before Yosef's abduction. Yaakov had sent Yosef to Shechem to check on his shepherding brothers and then, events unravel from there... Shechem, thus, also symbolizes Yaakov's culpability in Yosef's story. Shechem is mentioned (or alluded to) in this week's parsha. Let's look at the verse where Yaakov designates Yosef as firstborn and bequeaths the double portion.

*"And I give to you **Shechem** [either translated as portion or city of Shechem] one more than to your brothers, which I wrested from the Amorites with my sword and* bow*." (Bereishit 48:22)*	וַאֲנִי נָתַתִּי לְךָ שְׁכֶם אַחַד עַל־אַחֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר לָקַחְתִּי מִיַּד הָאֱמֹרִי בְּחַרְבִּי וּבְקַשְׁתִּי: (בראשית מח:כב)

Yaakov gives Yosef the city of Shechem! The verse attributes Shechem's conquest to Yaakov, and not to Shimon and Levi. *Rashi* (11th century French commentator) tells us a *midrash*ic background story, not in the Torah text, of how the neighboring Canaanite armies attacked Shechem, as a delayed response to Shimon and Levi, and Yaakov defended his entire family.

The midrash imagines Yaakov as a patriarch who fights on behalf of his children, in the very place of his family's shame. Thus, in this portrayal, Yaakov reclaims the Shechem that represents his children's troubles and perhaps his own failures as their father. Now, with the midrash grafted into the meaning of the text, Yaakov *Avinu*, at the end of his life, can pass on a revisionist legacy, that is consistent with his greatness as expressed in other facets of his story.

A defining moment in Yaakov's greatness is his wrestling with the angel, in which Yaakov triumphs, though diminished. Yaakov's confrontational spirituality is *midrash*ically embedded in his bequest of Shechem to Yosef in the verse cited above, Bereishit 48:22. Yaakov acquired Shechem through weaponry: בְּחַרְבִּי וּבְקַשְׁתִּי *my sword and my bow*. The Talmud (*Bava Batra* 123a) renders these words as expressions of prayer: חרבי זו תפילה, בקשתי זו בקשה, *my sword is prayer and my bow is supplication*.

If this were not Torah and Yaakov *Avinu*, the weapon metaphors for prayer seem heretical. Against Whom is he waging war? But this is Yaakov who has been renamed Yisroel, the one who wrestles with G-d.

Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." (Bereishit 32:29)	וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאָמֵר עוֹד שִׁמְךָ כִּי אִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי־שָׂרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתּוּכָל: (בראשית לב: כט)

Thus, the very Yaakov who was alone on the river bank when he fought an angel, used spiritual ammunition, this time, on behalf of his family in Shechem. Through midrash, Yaakov *Avinu* is transformed from a flawed, but great man into an epic patriarch, who directs his audacious prayers not only for his personal survival, but on behalf of his children. With militant prayers Yaakov subverts the spiritual indifference he had once expressed in *Hatachat Elokim Ani? Can I take the place of G-d?*

For Yosef, the words *Hatachat Elokim Ani? Can I take the place of G-d?* mean something else entirely and represent a theology. With this expression, Yosef reassures his brothers that he will not take revenge; for though they schemed to harm him, their actions were part of G-d's greater plan to save an entire nation from famine.

We are heirs to both the legacy of Yaakov and that of Yosef, and their contradictory modes of belligerent prayer and faith in G-d's plan. Yosef trusts that the unfolding of our lives has greater context than our limited frame of reference. Yaakov challenges even G-d's greater picture and demands an alternate destiny.

Like Yosef, surely, there are times in our life, where we look back at our past setbacks and difficulties and see how these painful events were necessary for our own growth, and accomplishments. More often than not, though, we cannot make meaning of tragedy. Misapplying Yosef's faith would be spiritually toxic and heretical: to explain away why bad things happen and callously dismiss the suffering of others. Initially, the concept of Yaakov's militant prayer seemed the heretical construct, but rather it is the *midrash*ic Yaakov and his confrontational spirituality who inspires us to engage with a G-d who has created and sustains a world of suffering, and tragedy.

Rabbanit Tanya Farber served as a Jewish educator in yeshiva high schools in NY and NJ, coordinated a high school beit midrash, and taught her own 4th grade curriculum. Her teaching integrates text study with improv and other creative modalities, and Tefillah (prayer liturgy) with mindfulness and movement. Tanya also worked for a decade with adults with developmental disabilities, and remains committed to accessibility and inclusion in religious communities. Tanya studied Torah in charedi seminaries, batei midrash, study halls (Drisha, Hadar) and completed social justice internships. Her teaching fuses Torah and spiritual relevance with the ethical call to action and service.