

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Vayishlach

Dividing the Camp: A New Perspective

In the beginning of our parsha, Yaakov sends a message of peace to Esav. The messengers return to Yaakov, telling him that Esav is coming toward him with four hundred men. Verses eight and nine record Yaakov's response to this news:

וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיִּצָר לוֹ וַיַּחֲץ אֶת הָעַם אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ... לְשְׁנֵי מַחֲנֹת.
וַיֹּאמֶר אִם יָבוֹא עָשׂוּ אֶל הַמַּחֲנֶה הָאֶחָד וְהִכּוּהוּ וְהָיָה הַמַּחֲנֶה הַנִּשְׁאָר
לְפָלִיטָה.

Yaakov was very afraid and it distressed him; he divided the people with him... into two camps. He said: "If Esav will come to the one camp and will strike it, then the remaining camp will escape"

Three Questions

Of the many questions which are raised on these verses, we will mention three at this opening stage:

1. Numerous commentators note the seeming double expression concerning Yaakov's reaction: "1) [He] was very afraid 2) and it distressed him." To what does this "distress" refer beyond that which was the cause of his fear – Esav's imminent attack?
2. Rashi addresses another unusual feature in these verses: The word "מחנה - camp" is initially referred to in the feminine form – "הָאֶחָת", yet subsequently referred to in the masculine – "וְהִכּוּהוּ... הַנִּשְׁאָר". He responds by demonstrating that the word מחנה is one which is treated both as masculine and feminine, citing other examples of such words (e.g. "שמש" and "רוח"). However, a question nonetheless persists: even if this word can be referred to in *either* form, our verse combines *both* – switching from one to the other! What are we to make of this?

3. What was Yaakov's thinking in dividing the camps? If Esav struck one, why would he not then strike the other? Wouldn't they stand more chance against him if they were united? Alternatively, why do they both not try and escape already?

Understanding Esav's Message

One of the great commentators among the early Acharonim, the *Maaseh Hashem*,¹ explains this episode in the following way. Firstly, to understand Yaakov's reaction to Esav's message, we need to take another look at the message itself, namely, that he is coming toward Yaakov with four hundred men. The common understanding is that this was a declaration of war. However, certain Rishonim explain that it was in fact a message of peace.² The messengers open by saying, "We came to your brother, Esav." They emphasize Esav's identity as Yaakov's brother because he received them in a brotherly manner.³ Accordingly, the four hundred men with whom he is coming are as an honor escort for Yaakov!⁴

This changes everything, for it emerges that Esav has stated only peaceful intentions toward Yaakov. This is wonderful news, which then leads us to the question: If so, why was Yaakov so afraid upon hearing this message?

The answer is: because it is a message from Esav! Yaakov doesn't know if he can believe Esav's brotherly words. While it is possible that the message is genuine, it is also quite possible that Esav is fully intending to attack Yaakov, and has sent him this message of peace as a ruse. This is the source of Yaakov's fear. Moreover, not only is this prospect a cause for great fear, it is also a cause for distress.

In a sense, it would have been easier for Yaakov if the messengers had returned with an open declaration of war. Knowing what to expect, he could prepare himself accordingly. However, now that they have brought back a message of peace, the whole situation is much more complicated. On the one hand, it may

¹ Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi (1513-1585).

² See e.g. Commentary of Rashbam to this verse.

³ This is in contrast to Rashi's explanation of those words, see s.v. *el achicha*.

⁴ This might explain the phrase "וְגַם הֵלֵךְ לִקְרַאתוֹ" – And also he is coming to meet you." What is the meaning of the word "וְגַם – and also"? This is the first and only piece of news they are bringing back! However, according to the Rashbam, the meaning is that in the same way that you seek peace with him, he also wishes to reconcile with you.

be a lie, in which case Yaakov would need to arm his camp. On the other hand, there is always the chance that it is actually true, and that Esav is coming to make the peace. If this is the case, then if Yaakov were to receive Esav in a camp ready for war, this would itself precipitate a conflict which otherwise would not have occurred! This is Yaakov's dilemma, and this is why his reaction is twofold:

- On the one hand, "he was afraid" over the prospect that Esav may actually be coming to attack him.
- On the other hand, "he was distressed" on account of the fact that he could not make adequate preparations to defend himself against such an attack, just in case Esav really did want peace.

Given this complex situation, was there any way for Yaakov to effectively prepare for both eventualities?

The answer is, yes – to split the camps.

The Role of the Second Camp

Yaakov's reasoning in splitting the camp into two, as stated in the verse, was that if Esav should come and strike the first camp – "וְהָיָה הַמַּחֲנֶה הַנִּשְׂאָר לְפָלִיטָה". What is the meaning of this concluding phrase? The word "פליטה" can mean escape or rescue.

- We normally assume that Yaakov meant that if the first camp is attacked, then the second camp could escape and could itself be "לפליטה – spared".
- However, the *Maaseh Hashem* explains that Yaakov meant that if the first camp is attacked, the second camp will come to its rescue and be "לפליטה" *for the first camp!*

The reason for splitting of the camp in this way is based on the above. Yaakov cannot meet Esav with a fully armed camp, just in case Esav really wants to reconcile. Rather, he will need to receive Esav with a camp of peace. However, if Esav should enter that camp and then attack it,⁵ there will be another camp

⁵ The *Maaseh Hashem* adds that this is the meaning behind Yaakov's describing this scenario in two stages: "If Esav should 1) come to the first camp and 2) strike it." Why does he not simply say "If Esav should strike the first camp"? Rather, the worry is that Esav will first "come to the camp" i.e. he will be admitted entry in keeping with his declaration of peace, and then "strike it" once he is already inside.

nearby fully prepared for war which will be able to come to their defense and rescue.

Masculine and Feminine Camps

With the above in mind, we return to the question of the way in which Yaakov refers to the two camps. We noted that the verse begins by using the feminine form (“הַאֲחֵת”) and then *shifts midway* to use the masculine form (“וְהַכָּהוֹן...”) – a most unusual situation! Let us suggest that this shift reflects the differing nature of the two camps as we have come to understand them. The idea of war is primarily associated with men, while peace is more associated with women.⁶ As such, the first camp, which is the camp of peace that will receive Esav, is referred to with the feminine form – “הַאֲחֵת”. However, in the event that Esav will enter that camp and then turn it into a battle-ground – reflected by the shift to the masculine form – “וְהַכָּהוֹן”, then there will be another camp of war nearby – “הַנְּשֹׂאֵר” likewise referred to in the masculine, to come to do battle with him.

Yaakov’s Gift of Discovery

This approach may give us further insight into another of Yaakov’s preparations before meeting Esav. Let us ask: Given Yaakov’s uncertainty regarding Esav’s intentions, is there any way that he might be able to gauge them ahead of the actual meeting? This brings us to the animals which Yaakov sends to Esav as gifts. The common understanding is that the role of these gifts was to appease Esav. However, it is possible that there was an accompanying goal – to discover Esav’s real intentions.

As the verses describe, Yaakov sent the gifts in numerous installments, with large breaks in-between each group of animals. Additionally, he instructed those leading each group to say that “this is from Yaakov and he is coming soon.” What is behind this mode of presentation? Yaakov, feels that by sending the gifts in this protracted way, as well as by placing Esav in state of suspense by repeatedly telling him that Yaakov will be here soon, he will be able to see if Esav’s declarations of peace are genuine or a ploy.

⁶ See Kiddushin 2b where it explains although the word דרך (way) can also take either the masculine or feminine from, nevertheless, when it is used within the context of war, the masculine form is used, since: “דרך האיש לעשות – מלחמה ואין דרך האשה לעשות מלחמה – It is the way of men to wage war and not the way of women”.

- If Esav's feelings toward Yaakov are ones of friendship and reconciliation, then the longer he has to wait until finally seeing Yaakov, the more excited he will be.
- However, if his display of friendship is a façade, he will become increasingly frustrated at Yaakov not turning up already, and by the fifth or sixth message that "Yaakov is coming soon" his friendly face will wear away and his true colors will be revealed.

In other words, Yaakov's goal in sending gifts to Esav was not only to *appease* him, but also to *assess* him.

This idea might also give us new insight into Yaakov's explanation for sending these gifts, as expressed in verse 21: "כִּי אָמַר אֲכַפְּרָה פָּנָיו בַּמִּנְחָה הַהִלְכֶת לִפְנֵי – For he said, 'I will appease him with the gift that goes before me and after that I will meet him, perhaps he will forgive me.'" What is the meaning of the first phrase: "אֲכַפְּרָה פָּנָיו"? The word "כפרה" is normally translated as "atonement." Here, Rashi explains that this phrase means "to nullify Esav's face of anger," i.e. to appease him.

How does "atonement" come to mean "nullification"? Rashi explains that essentially, the word "לכפר" means to wipe away and remove. Hence, if it wipes away sin then it brings atonement, and if it wipes away anger then it brings appeasement. Based on this idea, let us suggest that with this gift, Yaakov was seeking to "wipe away" at *Esav's face itself*, i.e., the face of friendship he was presenting, seeking to discover whether or not it was his real face, "and after that I will see his [true] face, perhaps he will [indeed] forgive me."

In the event, as the Torah relates, Esav did show compassion toward Yaakov on this occasion, in keeping with the message he sent back. Nevertheless, as the ensuing verses indicate, Yaakov did not see this as the beginning of any ongoing positive relationship between the two, and proceeded to part ways peacefully with Esav as soon as he could. And indeed, history has shown, not only that such compassionate moments on Esav's part are few and far between, but also that his brotherly embrace brings with it its own challenges that are equally threatening for Jewish destiny and continuity, if not more so.