

Shabbat Parashat Vayishlach  
Rabbi David Englander

Do you look forward to going to your mailbox each day? Why or why not? Well, whatever your answer, this is the heading of the introduction to a website which refers to itself as 'lex' – short for letter-exchange. Want to get more letters from people? Want someone to write to? Sign on up, and soon your mailbox will contain something other than Lillian Vernon catalogs – you just might get a letter!

I don't think I could write a full-page letter by hand if I wanted to. Those muscles just aren't in shape anymore. And my handwriting was nothing to write home about before anyway. My six year old daughter currently 'pen pals' with her great grandmother – once they stop writing it would surprise me if she'll ever get another handwritten letter other than the occasional inappropriate postcard. If you are still in the habit of writing letters – actual, pen on paper letters, good for you. Something about writing without a delete key establishes a much different and connected tone that pushing keys, automatic spell checks, and choice of fonts just doesn't. Heck, it's rumored that a hand-written letter from Ricky Williams to the football commissioner helped his reinstatement appeal.

The letter-writing motif is visited by the rabbis in a midrash that links two important points in our history, the meeting of Esau and Jacob in our parasha, and a correspondence between the leader of the Jewish community, Judah the Prince, and the sovereign power of his time, Rome. Some will recall that for the rabbis these events separated by a millennia or more shared a critical common component. Rome was referred to by them as Edom, and the Torah tells us that when a certain person was born, they called him Edom – that person was Esau, Jacob's brother on whose reaction to the anticipated reunion the fate of Jacob, and of his descendants, would hinge.

In the midrash, Rabbi (as Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi is reverentially referred to – Madonna wasn't the first person to be referred to by one name!) instructs a rabbinic secretary to write a letter in his name to the Emperor Antoninus. The letter comes to Rabbi for proofing. It begins, 'From Judah the Prince to our Sovereign the Emperor Antoninus.' Rabbi Judah the Prince didn't like this opening and instructed his secretary to change it. What did he change the salutation to? One might think that it would be anathema to think of arguably the greatest rabbi ever referring to 'our Sovereign Emperor Antoninus'. But that wasn't it. That part he left. He changed the reference to himself. 'From your servant Judah to our Sovereign the Emperor Antoninus.'

Why does he do this? On the surface it is to link himself to Jacob. He says 'am I greater than our ancestor Ya'kov', who, when he sent messengers at the beginning of our parasha to Esav, 'to my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob'? Jacob used modest language to approach someone about whom he had, let's say, mixed feelings – would Rabbi Judah presume to be greater than Jacob? There is also the notion that Jacob was afraid for his physical life in this confrontation, just as the Jewish people of the Roman period depended on Rome's continued permission for mere survival – Rabbi Judah no doubt noted that similarity as well.

So what does the message of Jacob and his descendent Rabbi Judah have to do with both of their descendants – meaning us? Every d'var Torah starts with a moment of connection, where one idea connects to another – a d'var Torah after all is a connection between the text and the interpretation of the text. This one came from a somewhat unlikely source. I read in the sports section the other day that when Phillies shortstop Jimmy Rollins was named the MVP of the league in a very close vote, the runner up, Matt Holliday of the Rockies said, when asked about it, said something like ‘this is Jimmy’s day and I’m happy for him.’ No doubt he was disappointed, no doubt he would have rather been the winner, but being magnanimous in defeat – utilizing a very Jewish idea of inhabiting an appropriate amount of space in any given situation – connected well to the patriarch Jacob and his withdrawing into an appropriate amount of space in an attempt to manage his upcoming confrontation with Esau.

Sometimes this generosity of spirit – even of masking disappointment in order to allow someone else to have their moment – is consistent with Jewish values. Other times – when calling attention to an important cause, bringing light to an injustice, or doing something that, as our tradition would call it, brings God’s presence down to earth – it is o.k. to draw some attention to yourself. Many important Jewish values – modesty, silence, patience, generosity, trust, faith – living in concert with each of them is a fluid process – any one of them taken to an extreme destroys rather than builds.

Just one example that I had occasion to study with a group of people over the last couple of weeks is the value of patience – which if you flew here on an airplane over this holiday weekend was likely tested – is a recently tested one, no doubt. Not getting worked up over things out of your control – that’s much easier said than done. But patience in a situation where something positive can be done is no virtue – in fact it can be extremely damaging. Figuring out how modest to be and when it is ok to be the center of attention, figuring how best to apply what seems like a straight-forward attribute of patience – is a great challenge. We can measure our own efforts to reach our individual ethical potential next to role models like Jacob, Judah the Prince, and the relatively rare examples we find in the news for their positive embodiment of these and the other positive traits we are each called on to keep in mind at just about every waking moment.