

## Listening with Yaakov

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A Thanksgiving meal, or any family gathering, in our time of divisive politics and social polarization can be a source of great anxiety. How will we remain civil to those with whom we profoundly disagree? Parashat Vayetzei provides us with a model of how one of our ancestors, Yaakov, managed conflict with a family member and was able to move toward reconciliation.

A crucial aspect of reconciliation and healing is the willingness to listen and, through the process of listening, to make space for the uniqueness of the other person. Jonathan Shay, MD, a clinical psychiatrist who has worked extensively with veterans, writes that “healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma—being able safely to tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community.”<sup>[1]</sup> Listening is a crucial component of the necessary trust-building; he continues, “so before analyzing, before classifying, before thinking, before trying to do anything—we should listen.” Often, we listen to respond instead of to understand. Shay writes that often our “listening deteriorates into intellectual sorting” and this breaks trust. “What can Yaakov teach us about listening that paves the way toward peace?”

The parashah begins with Yaakov fleeing from his brother Esav, from whom he had stolen the blessing. Following his mother’s instruction, Yaakov seeks refuge in his uncle Lavan’s home. Now years after his deception, Yaakov has his own humbling experience of being tricked. Lavan repeatedly changes the terms of agreement for both Yaakov’s marriage and his employment, manipulating Yaakov into greater service to him.

Eventually Yaakov makes a unilateral decision to flee with his household from Lavan. When an incensed Lavan, pursues him, Yaakov is forced to stop and engage his adversary. This encounter could have taken many different forms including

physical violence. Instead, the story culminates with a pact leading to peace between Yaakov and Lavan. Embedded in the story of Yaakov and Lavan is a process of interpersonal trust-building, negotiation, assertion, and accommodation.

Lavan speaks first and has much to say. He begins with an accusation: “What did you mean by keeping me in the dark and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword[ . . . ]? Why did you flee in secrecy and mislead me and not tell me? . . .” (Gen. 31: 26-27). He fashions himself as the hero who would have sent Yaakov off with a festive meal, music, and kisses goodbye (a self-portrayal inconsistent with the fourteen years of deception and manipulation during which he prevented Yaakov from leaving).

How does Yaakov respond? What do we do when faced with someone who makes assertions we think are absurd and self-serving? First, Yaakov listens. This must have been a difficult process. He surely would have objected to Lavan’s portrayal of the events. Yaakov hears Lavan’s grievances and surely does not agree with much of the content of what he says, but his listening builds enough trust that they are able to resolve their differences civilly.

Israeli peace activist Rav Hanan Schlessinger identifies listening as an essential component in reconciliation:

We have to be able to reach across the divides and listen. We even have to listen when it looks like the other side doesn’t want to listen. [ . . . ] You should have the strength of character to enter into a dialogue in which at the first meeting or two they only yell at you. [ . . . ] Because very often, not always, after they yell and they see that you listen, you’re willing to acknowledge some of their grievances, sometimes they calm down and they’re willing to listen to you.<sup>[2]</sup>

What was significant in Yaakov's participation was not his arguments, but that he gave Lavan the opportunity to speak his mind and be heard. When he did respond, it was with what is sometimes referred to as an "I" statement: "I was afraid because I thought you would take your daughters from me by force" (Gen. 31:31). The two men go back and forth and, as Rav Schlessinger describes often happens the experience of listening draws them closer together and maximizes their ability to make a pact. After exhausting his need to speak his mind, Lavan shifts his posture and says to Yaakov, "Come, then, let us make a pact, you and I, that there may be a witness between you and me" (Gen. 31:44).

The process of peacebuilding becomes formalized through language and ritual. Following Lavan's proposal, Yaakov and his household create a pillar of stones, after which the Torah tells us: Lavan named it Yegar-sahadutha, and Yaakov named it Gal-ed. (Gen. 31:47)

Traditional commentators are fascinated by the different names given for this pillar by Lavan and Yaakov. As Rashi explains, these phrases are, respectively, the Aramaic and Hebrew words for "Mound of Witness." "Yegar-sahadutha" is also the first appearance of Aramaic in the Torah. We see a process of translation and interpretation among the two men as they navigate the use of two languages and ultimately two cultures and worldviews. Yaakov translates Lavan's Aramaic term, Yegar-sahadutha, into Hebrew. Lavan then offers in Hebrew—in Yaakov's language—an explanation of the meaning of the name based on its literal meaning: "This mound is a witness between you and me this day" (Gen. 31:48). Each of them is navigating the process of reconciliation through their native tongue and translation to the other's language.

The challenge of making space for and tolerating both men's worldviews is intensified by their inclusion of the religious language of prayer. When Lavan offers his interpretation of the pillar's symbolism, he concludes with prayer: "May the God of Abraham's [house] and the god of Nahor's [house] judge between us."

The biblical author adds that these refer to Yaakov and Lavan's ancestral deities. Interestingly, Lavan references Yaakov's grandfather, but he goes one generation farther back in

invoking his ancestry, to Terach, who was a common ancestor to both of them. As Sforno explains, "He had chosen Nachor to underline that Nachor's god was also the god of Terach, who was the father of both Avraham and Nachor." Lavan likely anticipated that Yaakov would be uncomfortable with invoking the deity of an idolator, and so he chooses their common ancestor as a way of establishing common ground. Yaakov does indeed seem uncomfortable: the Torah tells us that "Yaakov [then] swore by the Fear of his father Yitzhak's [house]" (31:53). As Sforno explains, Yaakov chose someone who was not the son of Terach to make certain it was understood that his oath was only to the God of Yitzhak.

Yet while prayer can be an area of divisiveness, it can also create a meeting ground for people from diverse backgrounds with contentious relationships. Chaplains frequently pray with people from religious backgrounds different from their own. Without being syncretistic, they work with the recipients of their care to find either common language, or they make space for the other to pray while being present and bearing witness to the other at prayer. Community clergy and religious leaders also often come together at times of mutual interest—such as Thanksgiving services—or to stand with one another during difficulties. In the presence of one another, they often offer prayers or reflections that can vary greatly in language, beliefs, and form. These programs are often not fully comfortable, just as listening is not always comfortable. But both experiences can create the kinds of relationships that build trust, a most basic component of reconciliation.

*The publication and distribution of the JTS Commentary are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).*

[1] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995.

[2] "Peacemakers in a Time of War" Forum at Temple Beth-El, Richmond Virginia. November 12, 2023.  
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