

Shabbat Vayigash 5786
Jacob Had Everything - Except Shalom Bayit
Rabbi Alex Freedman

Shabbat Shalom.

Imagine this: a titan of industry is retiring after an illustrious career. He grew a small company into an international corporation. People sought his leadership and wisdom for decades, so he agrees to a final interview.

The interviewer asks, “How would you sum up your professional journey?”

The CEO replies, “It’s been awful. A negative experience. Not worth it.”

Listeners would be shocked to hear this. Sure, everyone knows there are peaks and valleys. But at the end, he has to say that the journey was worth it, right?

This parashah, Vayigash, asks a hard question: What if a life can look successful—and still feel like a failure?

The Joseph story has finally reached its happy ending. Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, forgives them, and invites the whole *Mishpacha* to live with him in Egypt in order to survive the famine in Canaan. The whole family returns to Egypt permanently, and Joseph has a very special reunion with his beloved father Jacob. For so many years, the father thought his son was dead. Instead, they get to live out the rest of their days together. And the father even witnesses his son serve as virtual vice president of Egypt.

As the family moves to Egypt, Joseph brings Jacob to meet Pharaoh, his boss.

“Pharaoh asks Jacob: ‘How many are the years of your life?’

Jacob answered Pharaoh: ‘The years of my sojourn [on Earth] are 130. *Me’at Vra’im* - Few and bad have been the years of my life, nor do they come up to the lifespans of my fathers during their sojourns” (Gn. 47:8, 9).

In other words: My life has been short. And it’s been bad.

This strikes me like the CEO saying his journey has been one long negative experience, not worth it at all.

The first time I read the passage, I went, “Really?”

The Midrash imagines G-d saying almost the same thing to Jacob.

The Midrash imagines G-d responding: “I saved you from Esau. I rescued you from Laban. I returned Dinah to you. I reunited you with Joseph, whom you thought was dead.”

And I might add: Jacob was wealthy. His family was safe during a global famine. He had twelve sons and one daughter—and Joseph was alive. I know he had difficult moments, but in the end was there not any good at all?

The esteemed Bible commentator Robert Alter offers a wise perspective: “[Jacob] has, after all, achieved everything he aspired to achieve: the birthright, the blessing, marriage with his beloved Rachel, progeny, and wealth. But one measure of the profound moral realism of the story is that although he gets everything he wanted, it is not in the way he would have wanted, and the consequence is far more pain than contentment. From his clashing with his twin in the womb, everything has been a struggle.”

For Robert Alter, Jacob succeeded in the end with his achievements, but the toll was too much to bear. Jacob not only wrestled the angel, as we know, but struggled with people and relationships for his entire life, truly start to finish. First, his brother Esau in the womb, and then running away from home after stealing his older brother’s blessing. He deceived his blind father Isaac and then was himself deceived by his future father-in-law Laban. His two wives, Rachel and Leah, were jealous of each other. His sons were all jealous of Joseph, whom he thought he had lost forever.

Jacob had plenty of *things* in his life, but his *relationships* were all complicated or strained. Jacob had abundance—but no *Shalom Bayit*, peace at home. In his conversation with Pharaoh, this comes to the fore, which is why he says his life has been bad overall. When we consider his interactions with his family from his youth through old age, we understand. We remember the stress and the pain of deceiving others or being deceived. Of loving others and being lied to. And in Joseph’s case, of Jacob loving his son so deeply, fearing that he died, unimaginably reuniting with him, and then probably wondering why Joseph never reached out to him during all those years to say he was okay. To try to see his father again.

Jacob had so much on paper, but his home was a mess, so he felt he really had nothing at all.

Shalom Bayit is free: whether we have few dollars or many, it's accessible to all. And yet, *Shalom Bayit* is expensive: it requires an ongoing investment of time, good luck, and a partner on the other end also interested in making it work.

During winter break, so many of us have a break from school, work, and even the lovely Chicago weather. It's important for us to decelerate and recharge our batteries. Winter break is also a time when many of us get together with other people in our families, sometimes relatives from out of town or family we see only on occasion. Even though we are off of work, I encourage you to see these family gatherings as time *on*, instead of time *off*. Time for strengthening relationships and building *Shalom Bayit*.

I know every family is different, and every relationship is different, and there are lots of complexities in our homes. But I hope we can take Jacob's perspective to heart. I hope we can nurture and repair family relationships now, before we reach our end and feel more regret than pride.

Every house takes months to build—and a lifetime to maintain.

So too with *shalom bayit* and family relationships.

As Rabbi Zalman Schachter- Shalomi said: “The only way to get it together is... together.”

Shabbat Shalom.