The Power of Community

R. Avi Strausberg – strausberg@hadar.org

Parashat VaYishlah 5787

I grew up feeling quite lonely in my Judaism. I was drawn to it. Something pulled me toward davening and learning, but I found myself on the outside. When I was growing up, my family didn't usually attend services, so as a kid I would sit with other people's families at *shul*. And in college, I tried to find my place in Jewish life but often felt on the outskirts of the room.

It wasn't until my mid-twenties, when I participated in a Jewish farming fellowship called Adamah, that I discovered the power and meaning of being Jewish in community.

In Parshat VaYishlah, Jacob also finds himself alone. The *parashah* opens with Jacob preparing for a much-anticipated reunion with his brother Esau, after Jacob's betrayal many years before. In the opening verses, he first sends ahead messengers with gifts, followed by his family divided into neat units of his wives, maidservants, and their respective children. Finally, with all of his family and possessions across the river, Jacob stays behind.

בראשית לב:כה-כו

[25]וַיִּוָּתֵר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ וַיֵּאָבֵק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלוֹת הַשָּׁחַר: [26]וַיַּרְא כִּי לֹא יָכֹל לוֹ וַיִּגַּע בְּכַף יְרֵכוֹ וַתֵּקַע כַּף יֶרֶךְ יַעֲקֹב בְּהֵאָבְקוֹ עִמּוֹ:

Genesis 32:25-26

25 Jacob was left alone; a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. 26 When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him.

Finding himself alone on the other side of the river, Jacob is confronted by a mysterious figure who wrestles with him until the break of dawn. While the figure is not able to overcome him, he does wound Jacob, leaving the socket of Jacob's hip strained.

R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky[1] notes that the Torah is careful to tell us that this encounter that leaves Jacob damaged occurred while Jacob was left alone. Identifying the figure with Esau's evil guardian angel, he writes,

נתיבות שלום פרשת וישלח

הרי בעת ויותר יעקב לבדו ויאבק איש עמו, שכאשר נשאר לבד בלא כח הרבים בא עליו שרו של עשו ויגע בכף ירכו.

Netivot Shalom Parashat VaYishlah

Indeed, at the time of "Jacob was left alone; a man wrestled with him," when he remained alone without the strength of the collective, Esau's guardian angel attacked him and struck the socket of his hip.

According to R. Berezovsky, this encounter teaches us that it is only when we are alone, that we can be harmed. When we are connected to community, to the power of the many, we are invulnerable and the forces of our enemies can't harm us.

[1] Also known by his book as the Netivot Shalom (1911-2000).

The Talmud also highlights for us the power of community. The Torah teaches us that the *metzora*, one suffering with a particular skin affliction, must cry out about themselves: "*Tamei*, *tamei* (impure, impure)!"[2] Massekhet Shabbat makes it clear this isn't about warning others about contagion, as we might have suspected, but rather it's a cry for help and compassion.

תלמוד בבלי שבת סז.

"וְטָמֵא טָמֵא יִקְרָא". צָרִיךְ לְהוֹדִיעַ צַעֲרוֹ לָרַבִּים, וְרַבִּים יְבַקְּשׁוּ עָלָיו רַחֲמִים.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 67a

"They will cry, '*Tamei, tamei*!"—they must announce their pain to the community, and the community will pray for mercy for them.

The *metzora* is not warning people to stay away; rather, they are bringing people into their illness and allowing them to see them in their experience. When we are alone, when we don't reach out, we are vulnerable. When we reach out to people, we allow our communities to see our pain such that they'll be moved to pray for compassion on our behalf.

But the burden isn't on the individual alone to reach out to the community; the community has to actively look out for the individual. We cannot leave anyone behind. The Torah teaches us that if someone is found slain in the open field between towns, the elders of those towns must gather to swear, "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done."[3] The Mishnah is momentarily struck by this declaration and wonders:

[2] Leviticus 13:45.
[3] Deuteronomy 21:7.

משנה סוטה ט:ו

וְכִי עַל דַּעְתֵּנוּ עָלְתָה, שֶׁזְּקֵנֵי בֵית דִּין שׁוֹפְכֵי דָמִים הֵן, אֶלָּא שֶׁלֹּא בָא לְיָדֵינוּ וּפְטַרְנוּהוּ בְלֹא מָזוֹן, וְלֹא רְאִינוּהוּ וְהִנַּחְנוּהוּ בְלֹא לְוָיָה.

Mishnah Sotah 9:6

But did it enter our minds that the town elders are spillers of blood!? Rather, that the victim did not come into our jurisdiction, and we did not let them go without food, and we did not see them and abandon them without accompaniment.

Why would the elders need to swear they weren't responsible for the murder? Would it cross anyone's mind that these respectable leaders were actual spillers of blood? Rather, the Mishnah teaches that the true meaning behind the elders' declaration is a confession of social responsibility. They are swearing that the victim did not come to their city only to be sent away without food, and that they did not see him wander off without a protective escort.

I love the Mishnah's introduction of the word "accompaniment" (*levayah*). This same word is the word we use in modern Hebrew for funeral, when we accompany them even in death. The Torah and the Mishnah are teaching us that we are obligated to accompany someone not only in death, but also in life. As a community, we step into the role of the elders. We are asked to swear that we did not fail to accompany this person. We did not see them in need and let them go by. We did not see them hungry and fail to feed them.

In order for the power of community to work, it must be a two-way street. The individual who is in pain must reach out to the community, seeking support and compassion. In turn, the community must look out for the individual, ensuring that no one goes without accompaniment.

Our modern world makes it increasingly common to find ourselves far from friends and family. While technology promises connection, we may end up isolated behind a screen. And even when physically surrounded by loved ones, our grief and pain can leave us feeling entirely alone.

The prophet Balaam declared about the Jewish people, "Behold, it is a people that shall dwell alone."[4] Commenting on this verse, R. Berezovsky offers a radical reinterpretation: even when a person is physically solitary, if they remain deeply connected to others, it's as if they dwell alongside them.

נתיבות שלום פרשת בלק

אפילו כאשר אדם הוא בדד, שנמצא לבדו באין איש עמו, בכל זה אם הוא מקושר לחברותא, ישכן הרי זה כאילו הם שוכנים עמו.

Netivot Shalom Parashat Balak

Even when a person is physically solitary—meaning they find themselves entirely alone with no one else with them—nevertheless, if they are connected to others,[5] they will dwell [securely]. Behold, it is as if they are dwelling right there with them.

We can see a hint of this within Balaam's prophecy itself in the word *yishkon* ("shall dwell"). We can break the word *yishkon* into two words—*yesh kan* ("יש כ[א]ן - there is here"). Even when we find ourselves spiritually or physically isolated, if we anchor ourselves to the idea of fellowship, *yesh kan* community; there is, right here, a community dwelling alongside us.

[4] Numbers 23:9.

[5] In context, the R. Berezovsky is discussing the connection especially between Jacob and Joseph. This is why he uses the language here of *ḥavruta*, which is normally a pair. But it's clear from the plural language at the end of his discussion that it is not limited to *ḥavruta*, but about a communal connection more broadly.

When Jacob chose to stay behind on the other side of the river, his family listened and left him alone. Left solitary, he became vulnerable, ultimately wounded in a midnight struggle with a mysterious figure. Perhaps, in anticipation of facing his brother, Jacob felt he desperately needed that time to process his anxiety, fear, or shame. We all need moments of solitude. Yet, as the Torah and R. Berezovsky teach, the individual must know when to reach back out, and the community must ensure they never leave someone behind.

My Jewish experience growing up and my discovery of the sweetness of Jewish community in my twenties has driven home for me the necessity of being Jewish in Jewish community. We cannot do this without each other. In our own communities, may we live in such a way that we can confidently swear the elders' declaration—that we have left no one unaccompanied. And as individuals, even when we find ourselves deeply alone, may we always thread ourselves back to the community, knowing that *yesh kan*—there is, right here, a community dwelling alongside us.