



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Vayishlach 5772

By Liel Leibovitz
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Parshat Vayishlach marks the conclusion of the bitter feud between Jacob and Esau. After much anxiety and one long night's journey into transcendence during which Jacob wrestles with an angel representing his brother's spirit,¹ the two estranged siblings meet, hug and go their separate ways.

It's far from a Hollywood ending: Penitent and fearful, Jacob seeks to appease his brother with gifts, putting together a generous offering of assorted beasts; all those camels and goats, he hopes, would make everything right between them. It's a thoroughly modern approach—throwing money (or cattle) at the problem and hoping that bounty would smooth over even the hilliest of emotional terrains. In putting together his gift, it doesn't occur to Jacob that his brother—who he knows had, since their last parting, grown wealthy and powerful—might have no use for all these animals. Jacob isn't thinking rationally; he just wants the problem to go away.

And, much to Jacob's relief, when he finally does meet his brother, they meet amicably: "Esau ran toward him [Jacob] and embraced him, and he fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept."² Esau's willingness to reconcile, however, seems to have nothing to do with Jacob's excessive gifts, as he initially turns them down.³

Jacob's gifts and Esau's response might offer some insight to anyone concerned with addressing global hunger, a problem of enormous magnitude, affecting nearly one billion people around the world.⁴ Put simply, anyone thinking seriously about combating hunger may want to consider the lessons from *Parshat Vayishlach*—namely, the idea that gifts are sometimes motivated by self interest rather than sheer altruism, aren't always in the best interest of the recipient, and lack consideration for the reality of the conditions on the ground.

While not exactly gifts *per se*, emergency food shipments to nations in need often end up causing more damage than good. Take Haiti, for example, a nation which used to produce nearly half of all the rice it consumed. Following decades of damaging free trade agreements and in-kind food aid and the delivery of 15,000 tons of American rice after the 2010 earthquake, the nation's agricultural economy has been decimated, with local farmers unable to compete with the massive shipments of free grain flooding the island.⁵ Thanks to all of these "gifts," Haiti now imports 80 percent of the rice its population consumes.⁶

While shipments of food may be needed in the immediate aftermath of emergencies, our government's policy of always sending American food rather than cash to buy food from local farmers foments a vicious cycle that often

¹ Genesis Rabbah 77:3 and http://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3197/jewish/Vayishlach.htm.

² Genesis 32:4.

³ Genesis 33:9.

⁴ According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization: <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/92495/icode/>.

⁵ Beverly Bell, "Miami Rice: The Business of Disaster in Haiti," *Other Worlds*, 9 December 2010. <http://www.otherworldsarepossible.org/another-haiti-possible/miami-rice-business-disaster-haiti>

⁶ Marc Cohen, "Planting Now: Agricultural challenges and opportunities for Haiti's reconstruction," *Oxfam International*, October 2010. 7-8. <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/planting-now-agricultural-challenges-and-opportunities-for-haitis-reconstruction-112314>

brings about disastrous outcomes. And American food policy, effective as it is sometimes is in providing immediate relief to those who need it most, is often responsible for devastating long-term repercussions such as the rice shortage currently plaguing Haiti.

Parshat Vayishlach offers us a simple solution: give gifts that will strengthen and build relationships, rather than throwing money and resources at a problem without consideration for how to solve it in the long-term. Rather than send American food to places like Haiti, we should seek to purchase food from locally grown sources whenever possible or to provide cash vouchers that allow people to buy food that is available but often too expensive during moments of crisis. Solutions such as these work simultaneously to relieve hunger and bolster the local economy and food security.

American Jewish World Service is circulating a petition along these lines, calling on Congress to amend the 2012 Farm Bill and make sure we provide long-term solutions that address both hunger and poverty with respect, consideration and clear-mindedness. We should all sign it. We owe Jacob and Esau as much.

Help AJWS reach 10,000 signatures by New Year's. Sign the Jewish Petition for a Just Farm Bill at www.ajws.org/reversehunger.



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