



Redeeming Distress • Parshat Vayishlach

After twenty-two years of estrangement, Jacob is cautiously set to reunite with his brother, Esau. Their previous interaction culminated with Jacob fleeing to avoid Esau's potentially deadly wrath. Jacob's messengers return with news that Esau and his four hundred men were approaching. The Biblical text, which does not often provide vivid emotional depictions of the inner lives of its characters, informs us that Jacob was "greatly afraid - *va'yira Yaakov me'od* - and distressed, *va'yeitzer lo*" (Gen. 32:8).

Commentaries are bothered by two puzzling elements of Jacob's emotional reaction. First, God had previously appeared to Jacob, promising him that God would protect him (Gen. 28:15). How could Jacob be afraid if he had a divine guarantee of safety? Second, what is the difference between the seeming redundant descriptions of being "greatly afraid" and "distressed"?

Rabbi Eliav HaKohen, a medieval Tosafist scholar, uses the first question to answer the second. He suggests that the reason Jacob was "distressed" was precisely because he was "greatly afraid." He was disappointed in himself that he was scared despite God's promise of his safety.

Abarbanel, a 15th century Portuguese scholar, however, reflecting the influence of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, justifies Jacob's fear. He defines courage not as acting in the absence of fear, but rather acting rationally despite fear. It was the biologically natural response for Jacob to experience fear in that moment, yet he made

the moral and spiritual choice to overcome that fear and act courageously. Abarbanel's approach is encapsulated by Professor Nehama Leibowitz when she writes that "only after overcoming his fears and faintheartedness does the real hero and believer in God emerge" (*New Studies in Bereishit*, p. 355).

While Abarbanel's formulation redeems Jacob's ultimate behavior from criticism, it still portrays the original fear in an unfavorable light. The emotion needed to be conquered by reason. While there are certainly cases where emotions can become disordered and dysfunctional, however, most of the time, negative emotions serve a functional purpose. Culling from research, Dr. Will Meek identifies several potential benefits of anxiety, including how it can motivate us to act, drive us to be better prepared, focus our attention on important goals and values, and serve to protect us from dangerous situations.

Returning to Jacob, perhaps, unlike Abarbanel's reading, the fear itself was a healthy, functional, and adaptive response, which helped motivate, prepare, focus, and protect him from the threat. A rereading of the original verse may support such an approach. The Hebrew word "*vayeitzer*," which we translated as "distressed" is understood by Rabbeinu Ephraim, another medieval Tosafist scholar, as "narrow," from the root "*tzar*." If this is the case, the verse is not describing two emotions of "greatly afraid" and "distressed," but rather the functional impact of the negative emotion. "Jacob was greatly afraid, narrowing his focus" to the

challenge at hand. He subsequently takes proactive and protective actions. He prepares for the worst-case scenario, splitting his family into two camps to allow one to flee if necessary. Jacob then prays to God for protection and prepares gifts to present to Esau as a diplomatic tactic. Jacob isn't acting effectively despite his fear, but because of his fear.

Negative emotions do not always need to be overcome. They can be functional, beneficial, and redemptive. No doubt, we have all been

experiencing our share of negative emotions regarding the war in Israel. Whether fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, or grief, these negative emotions can motivate us to act, to be prepared, and to protect ourselves. They can also help us focus us on important values, driving us to do good deeds, uniting us as a people, and connecting us to God and loved ones. We would do well to take Jacob's lead, and not be afraid of fear but utilize fear to propel us to triumph.

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Character Challenge: Identify a negative emotion that you have experienced recently. Think about how that emotion can potentially help you better approach a challenge you are facing.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "Faith is not about optimism but about courage, the courage to face an unknown future knowing that we are not alone, that God is with us, lifting us when we fall, signaling the way" (*Celebrating Life*, p. 189).