

Why was Jacob Afraid?

Today's Torah portion appears to bring the saga of Jacob's sons to a happy conclusion. In a tearful reunion, Joseph reveals himself as their brother and immediately arranges that Jacob be brought to Egypt along with his entire progeny. In this way, the family will find protection and survive the famine. Jacob is overjoyed to learn that Joseph is alive and eagerly makes his way to him. Read the story in chapters 45 and 46.

During the journey to Egypt, however, God speaks to Jacob in a dream. God's message is one of reassurance... or is it? Read carefully 46:1-7, then join in conversation with the Jewish sages.

God addressed Israel in a night vision, saying, "Jacob! Jacob! ... I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt" (Gen. 46:2-3).

Abravanel (15th c. Torah commentator) poses the question: Why would God say "Do not be afraid" when there is no suggestion that Jacob was fearful about going to Egypt? Indeed, the text mentions only his joyful eagerness to be reunited with Joseph. How might you respond to Abravanel's question?

Says one student of Torah: "After all the tragedy endured by Jacob, including the way Joseph has been 'toying' with his family, it is not surprising that Jacob might be fearful of their future in Egypt." We can wonder, too, why Joseph, for all his emotion and familial concern, doesn't make the trek to Canaan to greet his elderly father. But if these factors cause Jacob anxiety, why doesn't the text explicitly portray his fear? Are we being reminded that God knows what lies deep and unarticulated in the heart of the believer?

An alternative approach can be taken by exploring the reference to Jacob's father, Isaac (vv. 1, 3). It prompts us to recall a previous passage (Gen. 26:2) where God explicitly tells Isaac NOT to go to Egypt. In this view, Jacob is

afraid of dishonouring the memory of his father's obedience to God. Is this interpretation convincing to you?

A further interpretation emerges in a 13th c. Jewish commentary (Hizkuni) echoing a midrash: "Jacob was afraid and said: Now that I am about to go down to Egypt the days are at hand foretold by my forefathers regarding the decree of bondage and affliction on my seed in a land not their own."¹

We know previously from Gen.15:13-14, as well as from the drama to follow in the Book of Exodus, that what began as a survival plan and family reunion in Egypt will amount, 400 years later, to the slavery of the Hebrews under Egyptian rule. It will take God's intervention through Moses to bring the descendants of Jacob back to Canaan, the land of their ancestors.

Perhaps, then, the Torah alludes to Jacob's 'greater vision'. He sees beyond the joy of family reunion and the comforts of Egypt, and is concerned for the destiny of his people, their fidelity to God, their ties with their God-given homeland. As Rashi (11th C.) puts it: Jacob "was distressed because he had been obliged to leave the homeland."²

Continue to discuss in the light of this interpretation. As I contemplate the future, what fears do I harbour, for my children, grandchildren, my community, my church? Do I allow God to speak to these fears in my life of prayer? •

1) Quoted in Leibowitz, 501. 2) *ibid.*

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (New York: Lambda. 1994); Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (URJ Press, 2006). Scripture: Plaut.

1. Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2009), 315-322.

© Teresa Pirola, 2011. lightoftorah.net

Reproduction permitted for non-commercial use with acknowledgement of website.