

The Worst-Case Scenario Torah Survival Handbook

I find it a bit humorous when someone asks “What’s the worst that could happen?” Usually this phrase comes up when you’re about to take a risk or decide to do something you’re unsure of. It’s meant to sound comforting, the encouragement to move forward and take the risk, and yet when you stop to think about it, there are plenty of worst case scenarios that aren’t comforting at all. In life, when we’re faced with a challenge, a decision to make, when we need to face our past or an uncomfortable situation, we often prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

This week we read *parshat Vayishlach*, the continuing narrative of Jacob’s life. The text tells us of Jacob’s preparation to meet with his brother Esau, the dream he has that changes his name to “Israel,” and Jacob’s move to Shechem where his family encounters drama and finally the death of Isaac, Jacob and Esau’s father. We read about the death of Rachel and the birth of Benjamin. While the text is filled with decisions and reminders of life’s ups and downs, the text begins with Jacob considering his own worst case scenario.

If you recall, Jacob was forced to flee from his home after his mother Rebekah conspired with him to get the birthright that belonged to his older brother, Esau. Jacob runs to the wilderness, where he has vivid dreams of angels on ladders and a few additional epiphanies as he tries to figure out what to do with his life. *Parshat Vayishlach* begins with the reunion of Jacob and Esau after this long absence. Jacob, trying to figure out how this meeting will play out, sends messengers ahead to his brother to test the waters. The messengers tell Esau about Jacob’s wealth and request for peace; they return sharing news that Esau himself will come to meet Jacob. You can imagine at this moment Jacob has a million different scenarios running through his head, and hearing his messengers share that Esau has 400 men with him was probably not reassuring. Jacob reacts by separating out his camps; he splits his family on opposite sides of the river, a clear sign that he expects the worst from this encounter.

It is in this moment of fear and dread that we see a significant change in Jacob. The last time he was scared, he turned to pray to God, but his prayer was like a bargain. God, if you do this for me, I will setup an altar to praise you. This time, Jacob’s prayer changes. He prays for safety and security rather than making a bargain with God because he realizes that he has nothing to offer. Instead, Jacob reminds God of the promise to protect him, to bless him with many children, wealth and love. Jacob knows that trust in God means understanding that God’s promise will not be fulfilled if Esau kills him.

As it turns out, all of his imagining a worst case scenario was merely a mental exercise because when Jacob and Esau are reunited, they embrace and cry. Often, thinking of the worst case scenario gets us all riled up to expect the worst, so we are not able to be clear headed and hope for the best. This week, Jacob not only shows us how his prayers have matured, but how he’s able to confront his fears.

Being prepared for a potentially bad situation is a helpful defense, but being able to give something - or someone - the benefit of the doubt is equally as important. We have to remember not to let our

imaginations run away with us. If we prepare for the possibilities, but still expect the best in people, we might be surprised.

ללמוד **To Learn:** ללמד **To Teach:** לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:** As we read this week's *parshah*, we see that Esau is willing to change. He takes a step back from his anger, from his rage against his brother from their childhood and embraces his own flesh and blood with warmth. Often in our lives we hold on to the negative and forget to embrace change. Later we see Joseph forgive his brothers for an even worse transgression. WE learn the power of forgiveness from these role models. As we approach the end of the year, start to talk as a family about letting go and moving forward.