

8 — Vayishlach: Brothers, Mothers, and Angels, Oh My!

Content note: *this episode features a discussion of rape and subsequent murder/genocide from 28:52 until 36:44.*

Lulav: Hello friends, Lulav here, from such episodes as "Vayeira: Your Only Episode, Which You Love", and also, not this episode! Just wanted to put out a PSA to any fellow podcasters to keep several gigabytes of open hard drive space on your recording device, because otherwise your recordings will rapidly degrade in quality. For the general listener, my only message is this: sorry about the audio quality on this episode and some parts of episode 9; we've identified the issue and are back on track in episode 10 with that (over-enunciating) crisp clear audio (speaking normally) that you've come to expect. Enjoy the show!

Jaz: Hi listeners! Jaz here. We're breaking from format for this episode, because Lulav is off on vacation, and I thought it'd be super boring to have me, so I brought you some guests!

Our first guest, Fay Twersky is vice president of the Hewlett Foundation, where she supports the foundation's president in managing special initiatives and she also leads the foundation's Effective Philanthropy Group. She also serves on the board of The Center for Effective Philanthropy and she is the founding co-chair for the Fund for Shared Insight.

And, she has also previously worked at Yad Hanadiv in Jerusalem, advising them on issues of strategy and organization. Before that, she spent four years at the Gates Foundation, designing the impact planning & improvement division. She was also a founder of BTW – Informing Change, a consulting firm. She holds two bachelor's degrees in Middle Eastern Studies and Rhetoric from UC Berkeley, and a master's degree in City Planning from MIT.

In case you're like, Jaz, who is this person really, and why do you have them and why do they have your last name, Mama, would you like to say hello?

Fay: Hello! It's great to be here Jazaroo.

Jaz: (*chuckles*) Hi. So, this is my mom, who I invited on my podcast so she could talk about Judaism with me. But, in case you're like, Jaz, I heard you have two moms, well, we have another bio for you. (*Fay laughs*)

Jill Blair has worked as a researcher, analyst, advocate, coach, consultant, social entrepreneur and business owner. Her passion and skills are in helping organizations and their leaders build a healthy, joyful, creative, values-based culture, and using information and experience to achieve meaningful results. She spent a year with Peninsula Jewish Community Center in the Bay Area as a Senior Fellow for Strategy &

Organizational Effectiveness and in the spring of 2019 her story about that year, *New Leader, Endless Possibility...* was published by the Ford Foundation of New York. I forgot that you named it that!

In addition to her passion for all things Jewish, Jill is deeply dedicated to democratic practice and launched two nonprofit philanthropic affinity groups to organize around national service and civic engagement — the Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service and PACE, Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement. She was a founding partner of Informing Change, a consulting firm for nonprofit and philanthropic organizations and leaders. Since 2007, she has been an independent consultant, working with a variety of influential organizations.

She also serves on the board of trustees of the Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School in Palo Alto, CA and as a mentor for the “Scoop” Jackson Leadership Fellows program in Seattle. Also, you wrote Jill all over your bio, and I kept cutting it because I don't want to call you that. So, this is my mom Lily and that's what I'm going to call her. *(Jill chuckles)*

Jill: Hi Jaz.

Jaz: Hi! Can you say hello to my listeners too?

Jill: Hi listeners! I'm really happy to be here.

Jaz: As you can tell from my parents' very long bios, they're very accomplished and cool and we have a lot to live up to! And so, but, when I say we... David Nathan, they can't see that, you have to say hello with your voice.

David Nathan: Hello!

Jaz: *(laughs)* David Nathan Twersky is a first year in college at the University of Chicago. He has many talents in art and science and talking about texts, and is also my favorite and only brother. When I told him I was going to have our parents on an episode, he said, “what about me?” and then he followed it up with, “I guess I'm not queer, for your Kosher Queers podcast” *(David Nathan laughs)* “but I'm part of the family, so it's like I'm culturally queer.” *(Fay and Jill laugh)* So, I agreed and that's why he's here.

David Nathan: Hello! Happy to be here. Also, I'm the rubber duck enthusiast of the family, so, important bio component. *(Fay laughs)*

Jaz: You're right, I forgot to add it. I'm so glad all of you are here!

Fay: It's great to be here, Jaz. Thank you.

[Brivele intro music plays]

4:40

Jaz: Welcome to Kosher Queers, a podcast with at least two Jews and generally more than three opinions! Each week we bring you queer takes on Torah. I'm Jaz, and this is my whole family. And today, we're talking about parashat Vayishlach. Also, David Nathan volunteered to do our one-minute summary of this parsha.

David Nathan: Yes. I'm so ready.

Jaz: *(chuckles)* Ready, set —

David Nathan: Alright, count me in.

Jaz: Go!

David Nathan: 32: Jacob prepares to meet Esau. He sends messengers to Esau who return to tell Jacob that Esau is on his way with 400 men. Jacob is concerned that Esau is preparing to attack so he splits his group into two camps so at least one will be able to escape. Jacob selects a bunch of animals as gifts to appease Esau and sends them on ahead. Jacob sends the whole night wrestling with an angel who dislocates Jacob's hip and renames him Israel. 33: Jacob meet and embrace, but not before a lot of prostration from Jacob. 34: One of the Hivites rapes Jacob's daughter, but then wants to marry her so badly that he offers to pay any price. Jacob's sons, being angry about the violation of their sister, agree that she will marry him only if all the men in the town are circumcised, which they are and then Jacob's sons come and slaughter them all. 35: Jacob purifies the household of alien gods, goes to Bethel and builds an altar there and is renamed Israel again. Jacob journeys onward Deborah, Rachel, and Isaac die. 36: Esau has hella descendants. Time. *(ringer goes off)*

Jaz: *(laughs)* That was pretty good. You were so prompt. Okay, we'll go through it a little more slowly this time. I will do the longer version of that summary *(David Nathan laughs)* and you'll all interrupt me with questions and discussion and then we can talk about it.

David Nathan: Yes.

Fay: Sounds good.

Jaz: So we return with, Jacob is going to see his brother Esau and he tells messengers to go ahead and talk to his brother, and the messengers come back to Jacob and say, "Esau's coming towards you and there are 400 men with him." Jacob is frightened and so he divides up his party so that they will be in two camps. Do we have questions so far? Lily, you brought something up earlier about this part?

Jill: Yes, there were a couple of things that struck me about this. They're on the road to see each other and in the version that I read, it described Jacob as sending angels ahead of him to meet up with his brother Esau and that the angels returned to Jacob to say, "We came to him and he's coming with a lot of people. Four hundred, actually." The angels didn't say that those 400 were soldiers and yet Jacob panicked, and there were two things about that that struck me. One was that these were angels in this translation, although I saw in another translation they were just messengers and what was the significance of them being angels vs messengers? And the other was that there was nothing that implied they were combatants and yet Jacob was so ready for a battle that he panicked over the possibility that what Esau was doing was preparing for a fight.

Jaz: Mm. Why do you think that he panicked about it?

Jill: Well, I think I used the word "project" at one point and everybody kind of looked at me. That he was projecting. But I don't know. Jacob himself was travelling with quite a gaggle. So, he was travelling with a gaggle presumably not to have a fight with his brother but to meet up with his brother, and yet when he heard his brother was travelling with a gaggle, he made an assumption that his brother was coming to kill him and I don't know what that means. Does it mean that he felt so guilty about his own past that he assumed that there was no way around the possibility that he was going to be murdered or that he was himself actually anticipating a fight that he might have initiated?

Jaz: Mm.

David Nathan: To me this struck me more as something about assumptions, right. So, Esau, when they do meet, accepts Jacob really unhesitatingly and doesn't even want all the gifts that Jacob prepares and yet before the meeting, Jacob is so certain that Esau will be angry to some incredible extent that not only does he prepare all these gifts, he is legitimately worries about his whole crew being slaughtered, which of course ends up being not even close to the case, but that assumption was clearly very powerful for him.

Fay: Yeah. The only thing I would add here is that it made sense to make that assumption. There was a lot of bad blood between the brothers. They hadn't spoken or had any contact in many years, so our understanding, so the fact that Jacob would be worried I think would be a reasonable assumption. And when he heard that Esau was coming with 400 men, whether they were soldiers or not — in those times probably 400 men connoted soldiers — to me, it makes sense that he would be worried. One of Jacob's responses and one of the interpretations that we read was to use flattery to endear Esau to him, so he would send a gift and say, "Please my master, accept this." He continued to send other gifts with the moniker, "my master, my master." I think in the text he says it eight times. That is meant to endear him and soften Esau's heart to him.

David Nathan: He also calls himself "your servant Jacob" in a similar vein.

Fay: Yeah.

Jaz: It makes sense to me, the idea that he was running away from his family when he left home, that he doesn't know what his reception will be, and we know from his past that he wasn't a particularly warlike person and that he did associate his brother very much with that.

Jill: Mm hmm.

Jaz: And so he's afraid and his reaction is, "what can I possibly do to appease him?" And that kind of makes sense to me as a reaction. And so, the next bit is that he divides up his people he thinks, "Well, if my brother attacks one group of my people, the other one will escape" and then he prays, "Deliver me from my brother, that he won't attack me or my people." and then he sends lots of presents to Esau, goats and rams and sheep, camels and cows, yeah.

Jill: So Jaz, this was another thing that really struck me, and we did, we listened to some commentary on this, that Jacob did three things: he prayed, he flattered, and he presented gifts:

Jaz: Mm hmm

Jill: The commentary really struck me and it has stayed with me. That Jacob, as pious as he is, didn't actually have 100% confidence that his prayers would work by themselves.

Jaz: Yeah

Jill: So he was not counting only on G-d. He was exercising his own agency as well.

Jaz: Yeah. And we were talking about the idea that your actions also have to make things happen. You can't just rely on G-d to make things happen.

David Nathan: Well, yeah. And it seems pretty quintessentially Jewish. I always remember what they tell us on Yom Kippur/Rosh Hashanah times, that you're not allowed to pray for forgiveness until you've already asked the person for forgiveness three times. And people are very surprised when they hear that you have to ask them and then ask them again and then ask them a third time before you're even allowed to go to G-d.

Jill: Mm.

David Nathan: I think it's pretty consistent that yeah, you pray, but also you have to take action because otherwise your prayer is not really meaningful.

Jill and Jaz: Mm.

Fay: Gift giving I think was pretty of the culture. I mean, it still is now, but you had to give gifts if you wanted to pass through someone's land, ask for a favor. I think giving a gift was —

Jill: It's a little like an early bribe.

Fay: You could say that (*Jaz laughs*) or you could say it was part of the culture to give a gift.

Jill: Yeah.

Fay: Still is true in the Middle East today.

Jill: Yeah.

Jaz: Yeah. In fact, he sends these gifts in rows, right? He says to the one in front, "When my brother meets you and asks who are you, you shall answer 'your servant Jacob's. They are gifts sent to my lord Esau.'" So that's what you were talking about about the flattery. And then he gives very similar instructions to the second one and the third, that they go in rows, and he says, "I want my brother to see me last and send presents and other people first." They phrase it here as "and so the gift went on ahead, while he remained in camp."

Jill: Mm hmm.

Jaz: And then in the night, sort of sneakily, he takes his close family, his wives and concubines and his children and he crosses the river and that's when we move into this other bit, when then he's left alone and wrestled with this person, who is a man or an angel or —

Jill: Or G-d.

Jaz: Yeah. Right, so, they wrestle from the middle of the night until dawn and then the person wrenches his hip, like sprains it. The person says, "Let me go! I have to go at daybreak," and Jacob says, "I won't let you go. You have to bless me first." And then person says, "What's your name?" He says, "Jacob." And the person says, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob but Ysrael, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed." And then Jacob, or Ysrael now, asks for the stranger's name, and the stranger does not tell him and instead leaves.

David Nathan: So I wanna note what you just sort of glossed over, which is that he is supposed to be renamed now and yet, they continue to refer to him as Jacob.

Jaz: Right. It's very rude.

David Nathan: Right. And in fact, later he is renamed Israel a second time and they still sometimes refer to him as Israel and sometimes not.

Jill: Mm hmm

David Nathan: And it's not super clear what the delineation is, why it doesn't count here and what the whole deal is. So..

Fay: Well, maybe this is a good queer reference.

David Nathan: Right.

Fay: Because when you are transitioning from one identity to another, not everybody is caught up immediately. (*Family laughs*) Sometimes it takes them a little while. Sometimes they'll call on Jacob, sometimes they'll call on Israel, sometimes they go back and forth, they get a little confused until they really realize, okay, this dude is Israel.

Jaz: I like that reading. But I also, it is an interesting thing because they don't have it with Abraham, right? When we have Abraham in the text earlier, who also gets renamed, the text switches immediately and gets it the first time and this time they don't.

Jill: Why do you think that is, Jaz?

Jaz: I don't have a clear reading, but I was talking about this with the Abraham one earlier, about how it was actually very hard for me, in some respects, to use their older names. When a person gets a new name, you use that name for them, even retroactively.

Jill: Mm hmm.

Jaz: Like we were talking about the other night, off mic, about how, like, when I was little you didn't call me Jaz, but now, even if you said, when you were five, you would refer to me as Jaz, even though that wasn't my name then. And I, it is very hard for me to switch to people's other names, but even though it's convention for us to refer to Abraham as Abraham, we don't have the same instincts around —

Jill: Jacob and Israel!

Jaz: Right! And I wonder if it's because it's because we become Am Ysrael and it is very hard for us to think of his name —

David Nathan: Israel as a person

Jaz: — as all of our names.

David Nathan: Yeah. I do struggle with that. When I hear Israel, I do not think "oh, person!" I think people, at least.

Jaz: Right. And now, we have a state

David Nathan: Yeah.

Jaz: And so it's like a whole — I don't know what other people might have done, in the past, whether there was a period in history where people reacted differently. Part of what is hard for me is that the text is inconsistent about it and also we don't hear from him. He's named by somebody else.

Jill: Mm hmm.

David Nathan: Yeah. It's the same for Abraham and Sarah, no? That the name change is done externally, which I think is really interesting. I don't know if there are other biblical name changes, but at least these ones that I can think of, it's all external.

Jill: But actually as you're saying that, it makes me wonder, the issue of not fully owning a name is part of what we're getting. The name is conferred and it takes Jacob time to even adjust to the new name and so it gets conferred again. And then the interesting thing for the shift for Jacob's name is that it does go from being the name of a person to being the name of a people.

Jaz: Mm hmm.

Jill: And that also is related to when G-d confers the name a second time and says, "And you shall give rise to." You know, it's associated with not just an individual any longer but with the creation of a whole nation. So there's something about the process of ownership and you can start with "this is where I'm beginning," but it takes you awhile to get where you're going. The other thing is who is it that he is wrestling with?

Jaz: Right. We were talking about this earlier because you were saying that it says man here and angel here in your translation and in the original Hebrew the first time it mentions it, it does say, "ish," like a man, or a person. It doesn't say "malach" like an angel. So, originally —

Fay: Well, in verse 31, they say "Peniel." That's "face of G-d," right?

Jill: And —

David Nathan: But that's what Jacob —

Jill: Jacob names the place!

David Nathan: It's not what —

Jaz: Like, a difference between what the text says and what Jacob says.

Jill: Right. Exactly.

David Nathan: But also what the man says is “your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and prevailed.” That's verse 29.

Fay: Mm hmm.

Jill: Yup.

David Nathan: SO, that does suggest that the being is —

Jill: Divine!

David Nathan: Divine

Fay: Mm hmm

Jill: And then of course you wonder what is the difference between — I became convinced that it was a divine being because another reading of it was that the being touched his OWN hip and when he touched his own hip —

David Nathan: Right.

Jill: — Jacob's hip became dislocated.

Jaz: Right.

Jill: And that is again, having something acted upon you, in this case from a distance. And only a divine being —

David Nathan: How I read it the first time, because the Chabad does a little bit of the pronoun game with a lot of "he" and "he" and "he" and you never know who it's talking about. I initially read it as Jacob touched the angels's hip and his own hip was dislocated which I thought was sort of an interesting read.

18:36

Jaz: Right, we have this, "when he saw that he could not prevail against him, he touched the socket of his hip," and you're like, well, that's a lot of —

David Nathan: You have no idea!

Jill: Yeah.

Fay: To me, when I read this, and I read it a few times, I thought maybe he's just having a really big anxiety dream. He's about to go meet his brother who he hasn't seen in years, who he had a really big breakup with. He's worried, he feels compelled to go into the land of Israel, doesn't really feel prepared, he's about to meet his brother, he doesn't know how it's going to go, and he has a really tortured night's sleep. And maybe it's his own anxiety that is tormenting him and he's thrashing about and he throws out his hip!

Jill: *(laughs)* Uh huh! And look at the consequence! It's our first law of kashrut!

Jaz: It is, yeah! So then we have this proclamation that that is why we do not eat the thigh muscle that's on the socket of the hip.

Jill: Yeah.

David Nathan: I wanted to talk about that, actually.

Jaz: Okay.

David Nathan: Maybe just briefly, which is, many of the rules of kashrut, it is my understanding, come from "we don't eat that because it's in some way unclear".

Fay: Yes.

David Nathan: But this one seems like, "well this was a divine being".

Jaz: Right.

David Nathan: The divine being touched the hip socket

Jill: Yes.

David Nathan: So that doesn't seem — why would that make it unclean? This seems to me more of a holy thing, like that's why we don't eat it, because it was touched by divinity

Jill: Right.

David Nathan: Which seems counter to many of the rules of kashrut. So I was wondering what people thought of that.

Jaz: It's also interesting because you don't eat humans anyway.

David Nathan: Right.

Jill: Yeah, but they apply that to the animal.

Jaz: Yes, obviously, but it is an interesting thing because, y'know, most of the rules we have on kashrut that come up based on teachings in Leviticus are only supposed to apply to Jews, and this one is not supposed to just apply to Jews. This one is supposed to apply to everybody. It's considered a Noahide one.

Jill: That's interesting because the text here says, "Therefore the children of Israel may not eat the displaced tendon." Which really does make it the first law of kashrut. But, just on the issue more generally of kashrut, one of the things I read was, David Nathan, that modern interpretations really don't like to contextualize the laws of kashrut in terms of cleanliness or food safety because they're contextual and temporal so if you place them in that context, then you can disregard them once they become no longer a hazard. So the first law of kashrut cannot be associated with anything temporal. It is simply a truth that comes from the divine (*laughs*) and it may be that that's the guide for how to take on the future laws of kashrut, that they're not temporal, and even if now pork is no longer dangerous and shellfish is no longer dangerous because of refrigeration, that you still have to abide the laws because fundamentally, you may think that they came from something timely but they really all derive from something divine.

Fay: Just to, uh, beat this one more time, it is strange how you go from wrestling either with your own anxiety or with an angel of G-d or with some sublime being, that it becomes a law of kashrut. How does that relate to what we should or shouldn't eat? That feels like a big leap.

David Nathan: Mm hmm.

Jaz: And also —

Fay: If you get hit in the face by an angel, would you not eat a face? (*all laugh*)

Jaz: I also, just to put this in context of who all of us are, and also, the name of this podcast is Kosher Queers. I keep the closest to kosher in that I don't eat certain animals, but you might look at this thing and say it's fascinating that those come up with laws of kashrut but it's not like you live by the laws of kashrut.

Jill: No, but I'm conscious of them.

Fay: Jaz, you keep what we would call California Kosher.

Jaz: (jocularly) I know that.

Fay: And you live in New York.

Jaz: I know that!

David Nathan: Yeah.

Fay: What do you think about that?

Jaz: Well, but you don't do any of them, and you live in California.

Fay: Yeah.

Jill: Well, I do wanna — We probably should move on, but I want to say that I like your — Fay's — interpretation of this actually being kind of a nightmare as opposed to being something that really happens.

Fay: Who knows? I mean, we all have vivid dreams and why do we have them? They're part of our subconscious but we don't really fully understand our subconscious. So, y'know, people have spent time over millennia trying to interpret dreams. So I do think: it happens overnight; it is some kind of dream, whether a divine intervention dream or a real dream.

Jill: Yeah.

Fay: Sometimes we wake up and say, "Boy, that felt so real" and then we begin to recount it and it seems so crazy.

Jill, David Nathan, Jaz: Yeah.

Jaz: In the next parsha, the next one features Joseph's dreams quite prominently.

Fay: Yeah.

Jaz: Can we- can we move on to the next morning?

Fay: Yeah

Jill: Yep.

Jaz: Looking up, Jacob saw Esau coming and he has his 400 people and so then he divides up his children and he puts Rachel and Joseph in the last group, and Leah and all of her children in the first group, and then he goes and bows to his brother and then runs to greet him and Esau sees Jacob's family. Jacob offers Esau lots of gifts and Esau starts to decline them and Jacob says, "No, please take them" and Esau eventually accepts them and then Esau tries to walk with him and to accompany him and Jacob says "No, I'm going to go more slowly than you and we shouldn't go together."

Fay: So I'll start on this one because I have a personal association with this part of the story, especially a part that you didn't dwell on in your summary, Jaz. When I was a little girl, my dad, your Zeyde, who you only met when you were two months old, Jaz, he put me to sleep every night and he would tell me Bible stories. And this was one of my favorites. I'd ask for it again and again. He always told the stories and he would embellish them a little bit, but this one didn't actually need much embellishing, I realize now, (*laugh*) because he would tell the story of Jacob and Esau and how nervous Jacob was. He would build up the drama as they were walking across a field toward each other, each one with their reinforcements and so on and so forth, and describing how they were walking and they were nervous and weren't sure what was going to happen and, as they approached one another, they embraced and kissed and hugged. And, the moral of the story was the power of sibling and family bonds. (*Jaz hums contentedly*) I always loved that story and that's why I asked my dad for it again: because there's so much drama to it and yet, in the end, there was no warfare. They actually embraced as brothers. And I know more happened after that but, to me, that's my favorite interpretation because it was my dad's interpretation and it is the one that resonates the most for me.

Jaz: It's a lovely story. Obviously, I think that family's very important.

Jill: Mm hmm.

Jaz: I wonder how it would have resonated for your dad as a person with lots of siblings, y'know, to have that be the moral of the story.

Fay: My dad did have a lot of siblings.

Jaz: That's what I mean.

Fay: Yeah.

Jaz: Yeah.

David Nathan: I promise that when I have a gaggle of 400 soldiers, I won't attack you.
(Jill laughs and then Fay and Jaz join in)

Jaz: They weren't soldiers!

Jill: They were just men!

Jaz: When you have 400 followers I want to meet them and ask why they think they're following you.

David Nathan: Hey! They would be my disciples.

Jaz: Okay, alright.

Jill: Well, there is something kind of vivid about when Mama tells the story of hearing it as child, that you can visualize these two men walking towards each other and you don't know what's going to happen at the last minute. In a way, what it says to me is that we always have a choice. Right up until that moment, they have a choice. They can fight, or they can decide to embrace, and the choice they make is to embrace even though in some respects maybe they were both ready for a fight.

Fay: I do think that the part in the beginning, Jaz, that you read, I do think that Jacob...because he was never the fighter that Esau was, he always had to outsmart him and in some ways, you could say he does that now too — that is, in the way that he gives gifts and, um, continues to give gifts, and puts his family out first — his wives and his children and so forth — whereas Esau's coming with 400 men. We don't if they're soldiers, but you can imagine that that's the assumption, so Jacob is trying to avoid a fight and then Esau taps into...either because he's persuaded by the gifts, by the family, or some, y'know, filial bond.

Jaz: Mm hmm.

Jill: Well, in the next chapter, actually, we're led to believe that Esau really didn't expect these things and wasn't preparing for a fight.

Jaz: What do you mean?

Jill: Well, I'm looking at —

David Nathan: No, this is the same chapter. It's still in 33.

Jill: Esau said, "I have plenty, my brother. Let what you have remain yours." So he sort of says, "You didn't need to bring me gifts." And Jacob keeps, y'know, begging to give him gifts.

Jaz: Mm hmm

Jill: And Esau is basically saying, "It's not necessary and you don't need to call me your master. And in fact, let me leave with you some of the people who are with me."

Jaz: Mm hmm

Jill: And notwithstanding what you just said, that Esau is the fighter and Jacob is not, that Esau really does present here with a lot of kindness and a lot of generosity.

Jaz: Although my understanding of that line, of "let me leave some of them there with you", is Jacob interpreted that as a threat. That he says, "do not do that", and he doesn't want to stay with his brother's people and he has them go separately, so. Can we talk about the next story?

28:52

Jaz: So the next story is this kind of upsetting one. We don't have a lot about their daughters, but this parsha is about Dinah, one of Leah's daughters, and this man, Shechem, who is of one of the neighboring towns...yeah, rapes her and then asks to marry her. Jacob hears about it and waits till his son comes home and the sons come in and are very very upset and Shechem's father, Hamor, comes and asks for Dinah's hand in marriage and asks that Jacob- that they intermarry, a lot. Asks for Dinah to be married to them and then asks for Jacob's sons to marry. There's more to that story, but I'm going to pause there, unless you'd like me to finish?

David Nathan: Yeah, I had a number of questions about this one. One of the first that came up was why does he so extensively want to marry her? Because...they agree for all of the men in the town to be circumcised, and then while the men are all, y'know, in horrible pain, (*Fay chuckles*) they're...slaughtered. All of them. And so clearly, it's a heavy price. Like, presumably they don't think they're going to be slaughtered, but they agree to circumcise themselves, which is a heavy price, and they basically agree on the basis of: this one guy so desperately wants to marry Dinah, who he has just raped.

Jaz: I thought that there was a little bit of an implication- because his father asked for it, so it's not just Shechem but also Hamor who's interested in this and says, "not just my son wants to marry your daughter, but you can marry our daughters as well?" And he's part of this neighboring town and we know Jacob comes from wealth. My impression

was this was supposed to be cementing of a political alliance; that he's interested in her partially because it gives him access to power.

Fay: I thought that was right too. Also Shechem was the son of Hamor who was the chief of the country.

David Nathan: Yes.

Fay: So it wasn't just any old guy.

David Nathan: Yeah. Well, but I just wanted to say, in terms of...yes, presumably there was some political and power alliance, but also the text is, "Shechem, son of Hamor, the Hivite chief of the country, saw her and took her and lay with her by force. Being strongly drawn to Dinah, daughter of Jacob and in love with the maid, he spoke to the maid tenderly. So Shechem said to his father, 'get me this girl as a wife.'" So, Hamor may have then decided, "well, this is an opportunity to get a lot of clout."

Fay: Right.

David Nathan: This guy who has a bunch of sheep and camels, but the initiation is that this guy rapes Dinah and then for whatever reason, becomes so attached — the text says in love — that he goes to his father and asks for her as a wife. So he is really the initiator of this.

Jill: Yeah, I agree. I mean, I like Jaz's interpretation and Mama's affirmation of it, but I'm kind of with David Nathan that really what started this was Shechem's attraction to Dinah. What's troubling of course, about this part of the story is that we're being told that you can love and rape at the same time. And that's a terrible message. And there's something, not quite in the text, but you can't help but read this and feel that Dinah kind of is going along with it, because in the end they have to take her from his house. When the brothers come back and slaughter the village, they remove Dinah from his house, so she's in the house with him. It kinda is icky. It leaves me feeling not good about —

David Nathan: Well, obviously the whole situation is very gross.

Jill: Yeah.

Fay: We don't hear from her at all though.

Jill: We don't. She doesn't have a voice.

Fay: Yeah, we don't know that she's going along with it. She may just be captive.

Jill: Yeah —

David Nathan: Yeah, I don't see where you're getting that she was in his house.

Fay: She is, after they slaughtered everybody they went and got her.

(page turning noise)

Jaz: Yeah, in 34:27, they put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away.

Fay: Right, yeah. 26, yeah.

Jaz: Two different possible interpretations jump out at me. Obviously, there could be more. One of them is that they clearly do not want to be intermarried and it seems like it is a possible interpretation, given that she's in his house, that it was a thing that she wanted, that there was some attempt at choosing to join a neighboring group? But obviously that is counteracted by the bit that, it says that there's force. But it seems possible that there is some interpretation in which this would have been her choice, had her brothers not —

Jill: Killed everybody. Okay, so then the last two things that struck me here was: one was that, notwithstanding that they didn't want to intermarry, the implication is that Jacob's sons...that they plundered the city and they took the wives.

Jaz: Right.

Jill: So they committed the same act upon the women in the town —

Jaz: Right. That's horrifying.

Jill: — that was acted upon their sister and that Jacob was ashamed of them. “Thereupon Jacob said to Simeon and to Levi, ‘you have troubled me to discredit me among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites[...]and I am few in number and they will gather against me and I and my household will be destroyed.’” Jacob is both ashamed and also he's saying, “what have you done? Now you've put us more at risk again.”

David Nathan: Well, I also read it and was interested by it. This portion that you just read, and then the next line is they answered, “should our sister be treated like a harlot?” My question is is he speaking righteously or selfishly, right? Is it about “I can't believe you've just slaughtered this whole village, it's unjustified and you've done something wrong”, or is it more about “you've made them angry,”

Jill: What are we going to do?

David Nathan: Now I'm unsafe and that was the main concern and their reaction is "Jeez, you don't even care about your daughter, man?" Like, what's happening here?

Jaz: It's just so — nobody, as far as I can tell, in this narrative, listens to Dinah ever?

Jill: Yeah.

Jaz: I guess that's part of why — it doesn't feel to me like a likely interpretation, so I don't mean to downplay what happened to her. But I guess it's part of why I'm looking for some explanation that gives her some amount of agency, because nobody listens to her. Not Shechem, certainly, but also not her brothers or her father, like, there is no —

Jill: Well, nobody asks.

Jaz: Yeah. We don't hear her voice once, I don't think.

Fay: We don't know if Shechem is listening or not. We don't know if anybody's listening. We don't know if she's saying anything.

Jill: Right.

Fay: So we have to be careful not to just project what we would say.

Jaz: Mmm. Right, but, everybody else does speak. Shechem speaks, Hamor speaks, her brothers speak, and her father speaks and she doesn't speak, so we do have that amount of information.

Fay: And the men actually are pretty self-interested about their own reputation. The brothers — you could say they're worried about her reputation, but it also seems like somehow, they're worried that rape is bringing dishonor to them and the same thing with Jacob, where he's worried that the attack of the town is bringing dishonor to him. So they're worried about their honor, it seems like maybe even a little bit more than they're worried about Dinah.

Chorus voices: Yep, Yes.

Jill: I agree- that I completely agree with.

36:44

Jaz: Yeah. So the next bit is a little bit, G-d says to Jacob go to Bethel and remain there and build an altar. And Jacob says, like, "be purified, get rid of alien gods, like idols, in your house", to all of the people in his group, and they go and they build an altar and

nobody else pursues them. It says "a terror from G-d fell on the cities roundabout". He builds an altar and Rebecca's nurse dies and then G-d names him again. And G-d gives G-dself another name and says, "I am El Shaddai," which I believe is the first time G-d uses that name. And then G-d says, "you shall be a nation and the land that I gave will be for you as well and for your descendents," so it's the same blessing that ancestors give. Then Rachel is in childbirth and gives birth to Benjamin and then she dies and they bury her.

Fay: Where do they bury her, Jaz?

Jill: In, in...in Bethlehem!

Jaz: In Bethlehem.

Fay: I just ask that because of course that is a source of current modern tension.

Jaz: Of having her grave there and also it being such a Christian site?

Jill: Yes.

Fay: And in the West Bank.

Jaz: Hmm.

David Nathan: So I had a question about the beginning part, which is the part with the alien gods? Because...a few things! One is, in the text G-d never tells Jacob to purify and get rid of alien gods, so that is Jacob's idea, but these are the people in his group so he's had them for a while and I guess they've just never done this before? Like, they were carrying around alien gods before?

Jaz: Well, you didn't read this portion because I only asked you to read this one, but a couple parshas ago, I think actually in the last parsha, they flee from his uncle Laban's house and Rachel brings with her the gods of Laban's household and steals them and hides them, and so I think there is the implication that she still has them with her. Which is an interesting thing also, because that is his favorite wife of all of the four women that he is with. We don't have explicit reference to anybody else having —

Jill: Deities.

Fay: A queer reference is: when you're transitioning from many gods to one god (*Jaz laughs*), you take some time to accommodate that transition.

Jaz: Mm hmm.

David Nathan: But it's interesting, given the context elsewhere in the Bible, where they are very virulently anti-idol — very strongly and very passionately, so a) it's interesting that G-d still favors this guy even though he is bringing with him and in his group all these false gods, and then what I thought was interesting is he collects them, he says “purify yourselves”, and then instead of destroying them, he...buries them.

Fay: Mhmm.

David Nathan: He doesn't destroy them.

Fay: Yeah.

David Nathan: Which I thought was interesting and counter to what happens elsewhere in the story.

Fay: Mm.

Jaz: It felt to me a little bit, actually, like an interesting reflection...Because you're right David Nathan, that later on they get more stridently anti-idol, but this one feels to me like we're not a nation yet, we're still just a family. And they're an intermarried family. They're a family where these aren't just, like, the gods of the neighboring nation, they're his uncle's gods and the gods that his wife grew up with, and it is a different type of thing of: how do we build unconventional families, families that have lots of nuances and complicated family dynamics and that feels more of like...a thing that might be going on, to me.

Jill: And when you say it like that too, the burial of the deities rather than the destruction of them, is a little like what happens when- we know of families where the way that they deal with someone who's stepped outside the family in some way is that they grieve them; they mourn them as though they've died.

Jaz: Oof.

Jill: Rather than...y'know, it's just a kind of metaphor for the distance that you put between you and your own family.

Fay: Mm hmm.

Jaz: Mmmmm.

Jill: Tragically. I know we only have a few minutes left, and I need to say two things here. One is that I was struck...G-d said to him, “I am the almighty G-d, be fruitful and multiply, a nation and a multitude of nations shall come into existence from you”. Two things hit me about this. One is, the concept of “nation” sounds so strong and we have

this whole Torah that tells us that, y'know, we are going to be a nation (*laughs*) and we've always been, like, on the margins. So, just to say that we've never quite fulfilled that promise. And "among a multitude of nations" — it hit me that that is the diaspora, that what we've given rise to is not just a nation that is a powerful nation but also a multitude of nations within other nations, which felt to me like the diaspora.

Jaz: Yeah. We actually have to move on because there's one last one I want to talk about and then we have to make room for our ending segment. But! Our last thing in the text that I wanted to see if anybody wanted to talk about was, in that same area, we go back to the name Israel and "Israel's oldest son, Reuben, went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine. Israel found out," and it said now "the sons of Jacob were 12 in number", which means he takes Bilhah's son, even though it is not his own son, it is his son's son, to be his own son. And...yeah.

Jill: That's the 12th tribe!

Jaz: Yes.

Jill: That was shocking to me. I didn't realize that. I mean, it doesn't say it explicitly, because what we know is Reuben slept with her and then the next thing we hear is, "and now Jacob has 12 sons". Did you guys know that?

Fay: Yeah, that's what it says

Jill: (*laughs*) But did you know it before it said it? I mean, it's interesting.

Jaz: It was interesting to me, and interesting also when we think about parentage, that I had never heard of anything in the Torah before, I hadn't remembered this or hadn't heard it before, but, interesting to me because so much of the Torah, even in this parsha, is a long list of genealogies and we keep very close track of genealogies and who's the child of who and...Y'know, sometimes we go in modern times into more conservative settings and they're very much "who is your birth parent" and "who are you the child of" and we track you patrilineally and matrilineally and this is a- a little bit of a break from it. And so actually is this whole notion of Bilhah and Zilpah (*moms laugh*) because earlier on, Leah and Rachel say to their maids to have children with them because it's like claiming their own children before they have children. And it's almost like a...I don't know, like a biblical precedent for adoption.

Jill: Exactly. I agree.

David Nathan: Does Jacob have a son already before this bit?

Jaz: Jacob has lots of sons!

Jill (*overlapping*): Yes, lots of them.

Fay: Yeah.

Jaz: Reuben is his oldest son.

David Nathan: Right, I know. But when you count up the names of his sons, there's 11 of them.

Jaz: Mm hmm.

David Nathan: And so, where's the 12th one?

Jaz: Well, is Benjamin in this list?

David Nathan: Yes.

Jaz: Oh yes, that's Rachel's son...I don't know. I think...

Jill: Well, the 12th son is either Dan or Naphtali.

Jaz: No but, that's 11.

David Nathan: No, because if you count up the names there's 11 of them.

Jill: Oh, so we don't know. We don't get his name.

Jaz: We don't, maybe, get his name.

David Nathan: But did he...because, it says he lay with Bilhah and now they were 12 in number and then lists 11 names and says, "these are the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan Aram," so, did he have one already?

Jill: No, there's 12, David Nathan! There's Reuben, then there's Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulon, Joseph and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, and then Gad and Asher. That's 12.

Fay (*overlapping*): That's 12.

Jill: Twelve children.

David Nathan: Oh. I missed Reuben. (*Jaz laughs*) Whoops.

Jaz: The last bit I believe is just genealogies, so unless you have something else to say about genealogies...

David Nathan: Nope.

Jaz: Anything to say about genealogies?

Fay: No, we're good, Jaz.

Jaz: I think we're ready to move on to our next and last segment.

Jill: And to our next and last guest!

Jaz: Yeah! Linnie B, would you come join us? *(Jill and Lynn laugh)* For this last segment, we're gonna move on to Rating G-d's Writing, in which we rate the parsha on scales we just came up with to say how good we think it is. And for this segment, I am going to be joined by another family member, my aunt Linnie B: Lynn Blair. Can you say hello to the people?

Lynn: Hello, people. I'm Linnie B Blair!

Jaz: I think we can go in a circle, so, ask questions this way? Who would like to start?

Fay: What are we rating on?

Jaz: You are going to come up with your own scale! I can start, if you would like.

(Chorus of voices): Yes *(laughter)*

Jaz: Lily, on a scale of 12 sons, who make up 12 tribes, *(an unrelated phone alarm sounds)* how many sons would you rate this? Ope, sorry.

Jill: I would rate it a 10 because I thought it was a very rich parsha. Had lots of interesting twists and turns and things to think about, so, I give it 10 sons.

Jaz: Great. Now you have to ask Mama.

Jill: Oh! Okay, On a scale of 1 to 10 goats, how many goats would you give this parsha?

David Nathan: Okay wait, question about your scale.

Jill: Yes?

David Nathan: Are they he-goats or she-goats?

Jill: There's, um, 7 she-goats and three he-goats.

Lynn: I was hoping they were zygotes. (*laughter*)

Fay: Lily, thank you for that question. I'm going to abstain from a rating. The whole idea of rating the parsha is, uh, hard for me to do. I think it may be too ingrained in me from an early age that the Torah is a sacred thing, hard to rate, hard to understand, so I'm going to — if your scale includes an N/A, which best practice would suggest it would — I'm going to take an N/A.

Jaz: I think that means that scale passes on to you, David Nathan.

David Nathan: Okay. What was it, 10 goats?

Jill: Yes.

David Nathan: Okay. Well, yeah, I think I would just keep the seven she-goats and I'd lose the three he-goats (*assorted laughter*). I thought it was very interesting, good to pick apart, although I did think that some twists kinda came out of no place (*Jaz chuckles*) and then didn't receive further explanation and was a little bit shocked. When it says "and he came to town and his daughter was raped" that was a little like, "Boy! I've just been whacked in the face!" So, yeah. But it was pretty good.

Fay: That's why your face isn't kosher.

David Nathan: Yeah. Exactly. Yeah, Lily kind of stole my idea...on a scale of 0 to 30 milk camels, how many camels would you give this portion?

Lynn: Well, let's see. On a scale of 0 to 30 camels, I would give it 20-24 camels. Two things really affected me, one positively and one quite negatively. I really enjoyed the talk about forgiveness and asking for it three times before praying to G-d. I found that very inspiring. I have to say from when I read the parsha for the first time today and then hearing you discuss it, I'm extremely uncomfortable with the killing of all the men in town and the word that really came to me right away when I read it and I heard you discussing it was the word "overkill." (*Jill laughs*) And I feel that that is really where we get that from. If in fact they were so angry and so indignant and so self-righteous, I guess they could have just killed the man that raped Dinah. (*chorus of "yeah"s*) But, to kill all those men after having them circumcised felt to me in very...not in good faith.

David Nathan: And either way, they make them wait for three days in pain before they —

Lynn: Not good, okay (*Jill laughs*). Maybe I should lower that to 20 milk camels, but I really enjoyed today's parsha.

49:18

Jaz: Great. So, we're going to wrap up. Thank you all so much for being here. Before we go formally to the outro, one of the things Mama, that you made me aware of is that normally I talk about the land that we're on and the indigenous peoples who are here and kind of speed past that bit? We're recording over Thanksgiving and we're recording in a new place from where I usually record, so I thought, you know, it'll make us a little bit long, but maybe we could talk a little bit about who was here? So I did some research. We're recording this, this audio and this podcast today, on the traditional lands of the Kashaya people, who are a group of indigenous people from the Pomo group, which includes a number of different tribes, and they're actually very very near here. There's a small reservation still exists near here, but it has under 100 people living on it, and we know that at sort of the height of this group's existence, there were about 8,000 people who spoke the language, and now there's only a few dozen people who do.

(Chorus of voices): Hmm.

Jaz: That what's now California was one of the most linguistically diverse regions ever, and it is not anymore. The majority of those languages are not spoken anymore. So. I just thought it would be nice for us to acknowledge that history — you were talking about a diaspora — that this was and still is somebody else's homeland, and that that's where we're recording today.

Fay: Thank you Jaz, for sharing that with us. I do think it's important to honor where we are and the history of the place and...in particular where we are, it feels like a very holy place, so, it's good to honor the Kashaya, whose land this has been and still is.

Jaz: Yeah.

Jill: Thank you Jaz.

Lynn: Thank you Jaz.

Fay: Thank you Jaz.

Jaz: Thank you!

David Nathan: And thanks for having us on your podcast!

Jaz: Thank you! And for our listeners, thank you for listening! Thanks for listening to Kosher Queers! If you like what you've heard, you can support us on Patreon at

patreon.com/kosherqueers, which will give you bonus content and help us keep making this for you. You can also follow us on Twitter @kosherqueers or like us on Facebook at Kosher Queers, or email us your questions, comments, and concerns at kosherqueers@gmail.com. Our artwork is by the talented Lior Gross. Our music is courtesy of the fabulous band Brivele, whose work you can find on Bandcamp. And, our sound production is done by my lovely co-host, Lulav Arnow, (*wind foley begins*) who is not here this week, but will still dutifully edit all of our audio.

Lulav: (*spookily*) Ooooh, I will (*wind foley ends*).

Jaz: As usual, I'm Jaz Twersky and you can find me at @WordNerdKnitter on Twitter. And, have a lovely queer Jewish day.

[Brivele outro music]

Lulav: This week's gender is: an abundance of mothers.

Jaz: This week's pronouns are: she, her, and hers.