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DOES G-D WRITE THRILLERS? THE ROLE OF SUSPENSE IN SCRIPTURE

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According to Bing, suspense is “a state or feeling of excited or anxious uncertainty about what may happen”, or alternatively, “a quality in a work of fiction that arouses excited expectation or uncertainty about what may happen”. This second definition is in error – nothing about literary suspense is affected by categorization as fiction vs, nonfiction. Life can be suspenseful, as in the first definition; and a retelling of life can be as suspenseful as an imaginary narrative.

An author retelling a story from life, however, does not have to convey all the suspense of the original, or may choose to artificially create suspense where none existed. Do these choices matter? Do they affect the **meaning** of the story, or only the enjoyment and attentiveness of readers?

This question matters to me religiously because G-d makes the clear choice to heighten suspense in this week’s parshah. He does this both artificially and by including the time element in the story. Pay close attention to Genesis 27:30:

וַיְהִי
כַּאֲשֶׁר כָּלָה יִצְחָק לְבָרֵךְ אֶת־יַעֲקֹב
וַיְהִי
אֲךָ יָצָא יָצָא יַעֲקֹב מֵאֵת פְּנֵי יִצְחָק אָבִיו
וַעֲשׂוֹ אָחִיו בָּא מִצִּידוֹ

It happened

when Yitzchak finished blessing Yaakov

It happened

Yaakov akh yatzo yatza (=had just left? was just leaving?) from the presence of Yitzchak his father, and Esav his brother ba (was coming? had come?) from his hunt

The repetition of “*vayehi*” (=It happened) seems to serve no purpose at all other than to artificially heighten suspense by making us wait to find out what happened. Similarly, even if Yaakov and Esav nearly met, that seems

to have no effect on the substance of the story; what would have been different had Esav shown up ten minutes later? So why does G-d go to such literary and descriptive effort to make us feel this suspense?

The midrashei aggada do their best to make the story even more exciting. According to Rav Ayvo in Midrash Rabbah, Yitzchak’s house had two doors, and Yaakov left by one as Esav entered by the other. But the Rabbis thought this insufficient. Rather, the doors to Yitzchak’s house opened inward, and Yaakov hid behind one of them (in one version because he heard Esav’s footsteps) and slipped out after Esav passed. In Hadar Zekeinim’s version Yitzchak’s doors ordinarily opened outward, but the angel Gavriel reverse their hinges just in time. In any case, Esav delayed as long as he did only because angels kept untying the snares he set to catch the game for his father’s meal.

According to literarydevices.net, “Suspense is a literary device that authors use to keep their readers’ interest alive throughout the work. It is a feeling of anticipation that something risky or dangerous is about to happen. The purpose of using this type of anxiety in literature is to make readers more concerned about the characters, and to form sympathetic association with them.” So perhaps the sense that Yaakov was in danger from Esav helps us sympathize with him even if we have moral qualms about his actions. But that seems to me an insufficient justification. In any case, we may instead sympathize more with Esav, who lost out by only a second, and therefore clearly through no fault of his own.

So we need to step back and ask a more fundamental question. Was Yaakov in danger from Esav? Rashbam here makes an astounding comment.

– "ויהי אך יצא יצא" –

להגיד ניסים שנעשו ליעקב בא הכתוב, שאילו הקדים עשו לבא רגע אחד קודם, לא נתברך יעקב

“It happened as Yaakov was just leaving” -

Scripture here comes to tell us the miracles that were done for Yaakov that if Esav had come one moment earlier, Yaakov would not have been blessed.

Rashbam apparently thinks that the blessing was at risk, but not Yaakov’s life. His position is strengthened when we recall that Yaakov himself worries to his mother only about what his father will think of him if he is exposed, not about what his brother will do to him.

On the other hand, midrashim reasonably claim that the point of Esav coming directly “from his hunt” is to remind us that he was armed. Moreover, Esav reacts to learning of Yaakov’s deceit by planning to kill Yaakov after Yitzchak’s death. I don’t think we can be certain that concern for his father would have restrained his vengeance had he caught Yaakov in person. Finally, Rashbam’s reading does not explain why the Torah tells us that Yaakov was just leaving, rather than sticking with the key point, which is that Yitzchak had just finished giving the blessing. So I don’t find his reading sufficient either.

We therefore need to step back again, to ask an even more fundamental question. Why doesn’t Yaakov express any concern to his mother about being caught by Esav? I think the simplest explanation is that he expects Esav to be gone for long enough to leave him plenty of time to receive the blessing. This is supported by Yitzchak’s expression of surprise when Yaakov arrives so rapidly with his food.

If Esav arrived **earlier** than expected, we cannot have angels untying his snares to delay him. Rather, as Yaakov posits to explain his own timing, the angels must have been driving the animals **into** Esav’s snares. The purpose of the miracles therefore is not to prevent Esav and Yaakov from meeting, but to ensure that they almost meet. Therefore – what prevents them from meeting is not that Esav comes late, but rather that Yaakov leaves in time.

Is his leaving in time a miracle?

Or HaChayyim offers a totally different perspective on the story, one that he acknowledges reads “*yatzu yatzu*” differently than Chazal. He suggests that Yaakov left **because** he heard Esav coming. Moreover, he contends that the repetition of *vayehi* is not intended to convey suspense. Rather, he cites the standard midrashic contention that *vayehi* introduces misfortune. The repetition is intended to emphasize the great pain that Yaakov was in throughout this episode.

ורמז אל הצער שחש יעקב
שימצא כגנב במחתרת בפני אביו
כשהרגיש בביאת עשו:

This hints at the pain that Yaakov felt when fearing that he would be caught like a thief in a tunnel before his father when he heard Esav coming.

Or HaChayyim’s specific textual arguments do not compel me. But his perspective opens up one more possibility.

Why would angels intervene to rush Esav back, if we’re rooting for Yaakov to leave in time to escape? Why is it important for the Torah to create suspense, to make us feel that Esav could have caught Yaakov, with catastrophic consequences? The best answer is that the issue was really contingent, that Esav might have caught Yaakov, and the outcome hinged on Yaakov’s free-willed decision to leave when he did.

Why would that matter? In my reading, Yaakov believes that he has plenty of time, as in the normal course of nature Esav won’t arrive for hours. The ordinary and right thing for Yaakov to do is to remain in situ and thank his father, and to bask in his victory. But he is terribly uncomfortable with what he has done; he feels, as Or HaChayyim put it, “like a thief in his tunnel”. So he rushes (*yatzu yatzu*) out.

If Yaakov had stayed a moment longer than necessary – if he had had no pangs of conscience and seen his actions as untroubling, because the ends justify the means – Esav would have caught him, and very likely killed him. G-d and his angels made sure that Yaakov had the slimmest margin of error. But he passed the test.

People who are paralyzed by moral complexity cannot lead. Yaakov acted, and succeeded. But people who feel no pain when confronting morally complex situations generally should not be allowed to lead. This is especially the case when leadership includes genuine power over others, as in the blessing Yitzchak gives Yaakov.