

Torah Portion for Vayishlach

Shabbat beginning December 9, 2022

Vayishlach (“He sent”) concerns the celebration and perversion of life-cycle events that recognize social, spiritual, biological, purification, marital, and life transformations. Jacob sends great wealth to end Esau’s estrangement. He wrestles with a man overnight and gains the new name of Israel believing he has seen the face of God. Canaanite Shechem perverts the ritual of marriage by raping Jacob’s daughter Dinah and then asking for her hand in marriage. Jacob replies by perverting the newborn ritual of bris, saying he will permit the marriage only if all the city’s men become circumcised. Her brothers Simeon and Levi then kill the men and without burying them plunder their wealth. Before moving on Jacob purifies his family by disposing of their idols. Rachel dies in the birth of Benjamin and is buried.

Back then, there were no siddurim (prayer books) or Rabbis to help congregations create rituals for easing such transformations. Today’s Rabbis, according to Rabbi Michael Stevens, get to know congregants, their families, needs, relationships to other family members, and to Judaism. Seasoned Rabbis learn about highs and lows in everyone’s lives, even contacting them if they rarely attend synagogue. The wisest create new liturgy for life-cycle events.