

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Go and learn what Laban the Aramean sought to do to our father Jacob. Pharaoh made his decree only about the males whereas Laban sought to destroy everything." This passage from the Haggadah on Pesach -- evidently based on this week's parsha -- is extraordinarily difficult to understand.

First, it is a commentary on the phrase in Deuteronomy, *Arami oved avi*. As the overwhelming majority of commentators point out, the meaning of this phrase is "my father was a wandering Aramean", a reference either to Jacob, who escaped to Aram [Aram meaning Syria, a reference to Haran where Laban lived], or to Abraham, who left Aram in response to God's call to travel to the land of Canaan. It does not mean "an Aramean [Laban] tried to destroy my father." Some commentators read it this way, but almost certainly they only do so because of this passage in the Haggadah.

Second, nowhere in the parsha do we find that Laban actually tried to destroy Jacob. He deceived him, tried to exploit him, and chased after him when he fled. As he was about to catch up with Jacob, God appeared to him in a dream at night and said: 'Be very careful not to say anything, good or bad, to Jacob.' (Gen. 31:22). When Laban complains about the fact that Jacob was trying to escape, Jacob replies: "Twenty years now I have worked for you in your estate -- fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for some of your flocks. You changed my wages ten times!" (31:41). All this suggests that Laban behaved outrageously to Jacob, treating him like an unpaid labourer, almost a slave, but not that he tried to "destroy" him -- to kill him as Pharaoh tried to kill all male Israelite children.

Third, the Haggadah and the seder service of which it is the text, is about how the Egyptians enslaved and practised slow genocide against the Israelites and how God saved them from slavery and death. Why seek to diminish this whole narrative by saying that, actually, Pharaoh's decree was not that bad, Laban's was worse. This seems to make no sense, either in terms of the central theme of the Haggadah or in relation to the actual facts as recorded in the biblical text.

How then are we to understand it?

Perhaps the answer is this. Laban's behaviour is the paradigm of anti-Semites through the ages. It was not so much what Laban did that the Haggadah is

referring to, but what his behaviour gave rise to, in century after century. How so?

Laban begins by seeming like a friend. He offers Jacob refuge when he is in flight from Esau who has vowed to kill him. Yet it turns out that his behaviour is less generous than self-interested and calculating. Jacob works for him for seven years for Rachel. Then on the wedding night Laban substitutes Leah for Rachel, so that to marry Rachel, Jacob has to work another seven years. When Joseph is born to Rachel, Jacob tries to leave. Laban protests. Jacob works another six years, and then realises that the situation is untenable. Laban's sons are accusing him of getting rich at Laban's expense. Jacob senses that Laban himself is becoming hostile. Rachel and Leah agree, saying, "he treats us like strangers! He has sold us and spent the money!" (31:14-15).

Jacob realises that there is nothing he can do or say that will persuade Laban to let him leave. He has no choice but to escape. Laban then pursues him, and were it not for God's warning the night before he catches up with him, there is little doubt that he would have forced Jacob to return and live out the rest of his life as his unpaid labourer. As he says to Jacob the next day: "The daughters are my daughters! The sons are my sons! The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" (31:43). It turns out that everything he had ostensibly given Jacob, in his own mind he had not given at all.

Laban treats Jacob as his property, his slave. He is a non-person. In his eyes Jacob has no rights, no independent existence. He has given Jacob his daughters in marriage but still claims that they and their children belong to him, not Jacob. He has given Jacob an agreement as to the animals that will be his as his wages, yet he still insists that "The flocks are my flocks."

What arouses his anger, his rage, is that Jacob maintains his dignity and independence. Faced with an impossible existence as his father-in-law's slave, Jacob always finds a way of carrying on. Yes he has been cheated of his beloved Rachel, but he works so that he can marry her too. Yes he has been forced to work for nothing, but he uses his superior knowledge of animal husbandry to propose a deal which will allow him to build flocks of his own that will allow him to maintain what is now a large family. Jacob refuses to be defeated. Hemmed in on all sides, he finds a way out. That is Jacob's greatness. His methods are not those he would have chosen in other circumstances. He has to outwit an

extremely cunning adversary. But Jacob refuses to be defeated, or crushed and demoralised. In a seemingly impossible situation Jacob retains his dignity, independence and freedom. Jacob is no man's slave.

Laban is, in effect, the first anti-Semite. In age after age, Jews sought refuge from those, like Esau, who sought to kill them. The nations who gave them refuge seemed at first to be benefactors. But they demanded a price. They saw, in Jews, people who would make them rich. Wherever Jews went they brought prosperity to their hosts. Yet they refused to be mere chattels. They refused to be owned. They had their own identity and way of life; they insisted on the basic human right to be free. The host society then eventually turned against them. They claimed that Jews were exploiting them rather than what was in fact the case, that they were exploiting the Jews. And when Jews succeeded, they accused them of theft: "The flocks are my flocks! All that you see is mine!" They forgot that Jews had contributed massively to national prosperity. The fact that Jews had salvaged some self-respect, some independence, that they too had prospered, made them not just envious but angry. That

was when it became dangerous to be a Jew.

Laban was the first to display this syndrome but not the last. It happened again in Egypt after the death of Joseph. It happened under the Greeks and Romans, the Christian and Muslim empires of the Middle Ages, the European nations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and after the Russian Revolution.

In her fascinating book *World on Fire*, Amy Chua argues that ethnic hatred will always be directed by the host society against any conspicuously successful minority. All three conditions must be present.

- 1) The hated group must be a minority or people will fear to attack it.
- 2) It must be successful or people will not envy it, merely feel contempt for it.
- 3) It must be conspicuous or people will not notice it.

Jews tended to fit all three. That is why they were hated. And it began with Jacob during his stay with Laban. He was a minority, outnumbered by Laban's family. He was successful, and it was conspicuous: you could see it by looking at his flocks.

What the sages are saying in the Haggadah now becomes clear. Pharaoh was a one-time enemy of the Jews, but Laban exists, in one form or another, in age after age. The syndrome still exists today. As Amy Chua notes, Israel in the context of the Middle East is a conspicuously successful minority. It is a small country, a minority; it is successful and it is conspicuously so. Somehow, in a tiny country with few natural resources, it has outshone its neighbours. The result is envy that becomes anger that becomes hate. Where did it begin? With Laban.

Put this way, we begin to see Jacob in a new light. Jacob stands for minorities and small nations

everywhere. Jacob is the refusal to let large powers crush the few, the weak, the refugee. Jacob refuses to define himself as a slave, someone else's property. He maintains his inner dignity and freedom. He contributes to other people's prosperity but he defeats every attempt to be exploited. Jacob is the voice that says: I too am human. I too have rights. I too am free.

If Laban is the eternal paradigm of hatred of conspicuously successful minorities, then Jacob is the eternal paradigm of the human capacity to survive the hatred of others. In this strange way Jacob becomes the voice of hope in the conversation of humankind, the living proof that hate never wins the final victory; freedom does. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and clothing to wear, so that I shall come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God and I shall erect a monument.” (Genesis 28:20–21) What does it really mean ‘to return whole, in peace, (beshalom) to one's parents' home? Is it really possible to ‘come home’ again? The Torah portion of Vayetze speaks volumes about parents, adult children and what it really means to come home.

Rabbi Yeshoshua Baumel, in his collection of halakhic inquiries called *Emek Halakha*, writes the following fascinating responsum. A certain individual vowed to give a hundred dollars to a local synagogue if his son came back ‘beshalom’ – usually understood to mean whole-alive, in one piece, from the war. As it turned out, the son returned very much in one piece; the only problem was that he brought along his gentile wife, whom he'd married in France, as well as their child. The father now claimed that the conditions of his vow had not been met since the forbidden marriage constituted a breach of the ‘beshalom.’ The synagogue rabbi and board of trustees disagreed, claiming that as long as the son had returned home from the front without a war wound, the father owed the hundred dollars. Both parties agreed to abide by Rabbi Baumel's ruling.

Rabbi Baumel ruled that the father was required to pay the money to the synagogue. He ingeniously based his ruling on a Mishna in the little known Tractate *Tvul Yom* (Chap. 4 Mishna 7), where we learn that if a person vows to give wine or oil from his cistern as an offering to the priests (teruma), but stipulates ‘let this be a heave-offering provided that it comes up whole (shalem); then we take his intention to have been that it be safe from breakage or from spilling, but not necessarily from contracting impurity.’ As Rabbi Baumel explains, apparently according to a sage of the Mishna who determines the normative halakha, the concept of

'shalom' only refers to physical wholeness, without a breakage of spilling; in the instance of ritual impurity, the loss is not in the physical essence of the object but is rather in its religio-spiritual quality, and this latter defect cannot be considered a lack in 'beshalom.' Moreover, the son's 'impurity' may only be temporary, since the possibility always exists that his wife may undergo a proper conversion (Emek Halakha, Chap. 42).

I believe that we need not go all the way to a Mishna dealing with heave offerings in order to define the words 'to return to one's father's home beshalom.' Our biblical portion deals with the patriarch Jacob, setting out on a dangerous journey far from home, who also takes a vow saying that if God protects him and he returns to his father's house in peace beshalom, he will then erect a monument to the Lord. The definition of 'beshalom' in the context of Jacob's vow might shed more direct light on the question asked of Rabbi Baumel, and might very well suggest a different response.

It should be noted that although Jacob leaves his Uncle Laban's home and employ at the conclusion of Chapter 32 of the book of Genesis, he wanders all over the Land of Canaan until the end of Chapter 35, when he finally decides to return to his father's house. Why doesn't he 'go home' immediately? Is the Bible telling us that Jacob himself understood that he had not yet achieved the 'in peaceness' of his vow, and that until Chapter 35 he was not yet ready to return? I would submit that Jacob was waiting for the peace which comes from his being accepted by his father, the peace which comes from a loving relationship between father and son. Without this sense of parental acceptance, no child can truly feel whole.

Indeed, no one in the Torah has more problematic relationships than Jacob. He has difficulty with his brother, with his father-in-law, with his wife Leah, and with his sons. But the key to all his problematic relationships lies in his problems with his father, Isaac. Unless he repairs that tragic flaw, unless he feels that his father has forgiven him for the deception which haunts him throughout his life, he knows that he will never be able to 'return to my father's house in peace.'

Thus, we can read the series of events that begins with Jacob's departure from Laban at the end of Chapter 32 and his reunion with his father three chapters later as a crucial process in Jacob's development vis-a-vis his paternal relationship. It begins with a confrontation between the brothers in which Jacob bends over backwards to appear subservient to Esau, repeatedly calling him my master; plying him with gifts, urging him to 'take, I pray, my blessing' – all to the end of returning the fruits of the deception to the rightful biological first-born. Then, the Bible records how Jacob attempts to start a fresh life in Shekhem, only to have to face the rape of his daughter, Dina. His sons, Shimon and Levi, deceive their father and sully his name by destroying all the male inhabitants of the city. And then

in the very bloom of her life, Jacob's beloved Rachel dies in childbirth, as a result of her having deceived her father and stolen the household gods. It certainly seems as though Jacob is being repaid in spades for his having deceived his father, Isaac!

Then we encounter the worst betrayal of all, the terrible act of Reuven having usurped, or interfered with, the sleeping arrangements of his father. Whether we understand the words literally, that Reuven actually had relations with his father's concubine, Bilha, or whether we follow the interpretation of the Midrash, that Reuven merely moved his father's bed from Bilha's tent to the tent of his mother, Leah, after the death of Rachel, it was a frontal desecration of the father-son hierarchy, a son's flagrant invasion of the personal, private life of his father.

Until this point, Jacob's life is a steady accumulation of despair. But this act of Reuven's is the worst humiliation of all. Just knowing that Reuven even contemplated such an act could have led Jacob to lash out; fathers have responded violently for much less.

We now find one of the most striking passages in the Torah – not because of what it says but because of what it does not say. The literal reading of the biblical text records that Reuven went and slept with Bilha, his father's concubine. 'And Yisrael heard about it... (vayishma Yisrael)' (Genesis 35:22). Not only does the biblical sentence end here, but what follows in the parchment scroll is a complete break in the Torah writing. It is not just a gap of white space that continues on the same line, but it is rather a gap which continues until the next line, a pe'tuha, which generally signals a complete change in subject and a new beginning. Yet the cantillation for the last word before the gap, "Yisrael", is not a sof pasuk (period), as is usually the case before such an open space between texts, but is rather an etnahta (semi-colon), indicating a pause, but not a total interruption from the previous subject. I would suggest that between the lines the Torah is telling us that Jacob heard of his son's deception, is enraged, may even be livid with anger, but holds his wrath inside, remains silent – and thinks a great deal, perhaps amidst tears.

Undoubtedly, we would expect to find the verse after the long space (of Jacob's ruminations) telling us that Jacob banishes his scoundrel son, Reuven, disinheriting him from the tribes of Israel. Much the opposite, however. The text continues by presenting us with an almost superfluous fact. 'Now the sons of Jacob were twelve' (Genesis 35:23) – including Reuven. Then come four verses listing all the names of the twelve sons, at long last followed by the verse, 'And Jacob came unto Isaac his father to Mamre, to Kiryat Arba, which is Hebron...' (Gen. 35:27).

We are given no details about this ultimate reunion between son and father, Jacob and Isaac, bringing to a close more than two decades of separation and alienation. Apparently now – and not before – Jacob is finally ready to come home. But why now? Is it not

reasonable to assume that the last event which the Torah records, the cause of understandable tension between Jacob and his son, Reuven, is the most significant reason for Jacob's reconciliation with his father Isaac?

I would suggest that the blank space following Jacob's having heard of his son Reuven's indiscretion might have begun with rage, but it concluded with resolve for rapprochement. Jacob thinks that Reuven's arrogance is beyond contempt, but can a father divorce himself from his son? What do I gain from banishing my own flesh and blood? Is it Reuven's fault that he acted the way he did? Am I myself not at least partially to blame for having rejected my first-born Reuven in favor of the younger Joseph? Perhaps he was trying to tell me – albeit in a disgraceful and convoluted way – that he was my rightful heir? Or perhaps he was acting out his belief that Leah, and not a servant of Rachel, deserves to be the primary wife and mother, yielding the rightful first-born son. Such does Jacob agitate within himself. And he decides at last that if he can and must forgive his son for his deception towards him, it is logical to assume that his father, Isaac, who was also guilty of preferring one son over the other, must have forgiven him for his deception as well.

Now, finally, Jacob is ready to return to his father's home in peace... He has made peace with his father because he believes his father has made peace with him. Finally, he can make peace with himself.

When does a son return to his father beshalom? Only when the father accepts the son, and the son accepts the father, in a personal and emotional sense as well as in a physical one.

So, does the father in our responsum have to pay the money to the synagogue? Only if he is ready and able to accept his son and his new wife beshalom. And that depends on the father and on the son in all the fullness, complexity and resolution of their relationship – past, present and, only then, future. ©2024 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

When he finally arrives close to his destination he encounters the neighbors and daughters of Lavan who are unable to water their flocks because of the great rock that seals the opening to the well of water. The Torah then describes for us in great detail how Yaakov greets the people and the family of Lavan and in a selfless gesture of help and compassion to others - who he has just met - singlehandedly removes the rock from the mouth of the well.

It is interesting to note that the Torah lavishes a great deal of space and detail to this incident at the well while the Torah tells us nothing about the fourteen years of Yaakov's life that passed between his leaving home and arriving at the house of Lavan. Rashi, quoting

Midrash, tells us that Yaakov spent these fourteen years in spiritual study and personal growth at the yeshiva academy of Shem and Ever. So, if this is in fact the case, why does the Torah not tell us of this great feat of spiritual challenge and self-improvement – fourteen years of sleepless study - while it does seem to go into mystifying detail regarding the incident at the well of water? Certainly, it would seem that the years of study would have a greater impact on the life and persona of Yaakov than rolling a rock off of the mouth of a well would have had.

As we see throughout the book of Bereshith, if not indeed regarding all of the Torah generally, the Torah places utmost emphasis on the behavior that one exhibits towards other human beings. Not everyone can study for fourteen years in a yeshiva day and night. Yet everyone can care about others, can demand justice for the defenseless and can provide, to the best of one's abilities, to help those who so obviously need it. Though Yaakov, like the great figures and founders of our people that appear here in Bereshith, is unique in spiritual stature and blessed with Divine vision and revelation, he is also essentially everyman. His actions are meant to be a template of attitude and behavior for his descendants and the people who bear his name.

The Torah, while making it clear that we can never personally be the equal of our ancestors in their exalted spiritual state and accomplishments, we can and should attempt to emulate their values and behavior. We can all help those in need to roll the rock off of their wells and thereby to nurture an environment where the Yaakov within all of us can grow and expand. ©2024 *Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Names in the Bible are not just names; they are descriptions of personalities. This is especially evident as Jacob's wives give reasons for the respective names they give their children (Genesis 29, 30).

Stepping back, we too can see how these names have deeper meaning:

- Reuben may be a composite of re'u ben. Ben, in general terms, is a child – and no matter how old we are, we are all children – linked to re'u, which means not only to see, but to empathize. Reuben may mean a person who empathizes.

- Levi is associated with the word melaveh (to escort). Thus, the name describes a person who accompanies or, more broadly, is present for others.

- Dinah has tucked into her name two words: din (literally, judgment), and the letter heh, which represents the name of God. Thus, Dinah may mean one who

judges others with the compassion of God.

This principle can apply to all names in the Bible:

- Moshe (Moses), which means “to draw up,” speaks of one who assists others, lifting them out of the narrow straits.

- Miriam can be seen as a composite of mir – myrrh, a sweet spice – and yam, the depths of the sea. Miriam is suffused with deep, deep sweetness.

And so, too, modern Hebrew names all have meaning: Ari is the light of God; Ronit is one who brings melody to the world.

In fact, even our non-Jewish names may have meaning when written out phonetically in Hebrew. The source for this theory is the Talmud, which gives meaning to the Persian names found in the Book of Esther when written out in Hebrew (Megillah 13a; see also Yoma 83b). Here are some examples of creatively deciphering English names:

- Gloria may be a composite of gal (to reveal) and re'iyah (vision) – related to the covenantal vision. Gloria could therefore refer to one who leads a life illuminating the covenant.

- Scott sounds like Sukkot, referring to the booths or God's protection as we journeyed through the desert. Thus, Scott speaks of one who gives succor to others.

It is an awesome, holy moment when parents name a newborn child, when a convert is named, or when a Jew receives a Hebrew name later in life. Names reflect past memories, offer hopes for the future, and mystically reflect who we are.

The emphasis on the meaning of names hints that when connecting with others, whatever the circumstances – whether we encounter an Uber driver or a waiter serving our food at a wedding – we should ask the person's name. Names give value; people who are named are no longer objects but subjects.

Beyond the understanding of the name itself, names are infused with additional importance by often honoring one who came before. It is laudable to know something about the person we've been named for and to understand how our names – in their meanings and their remembrances – embody the potential of the person we can one day become. ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

His Wife's Sister

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The Torah forbids a man from marrying his wife's sister as long as his wife is alive: “You shall not take a woman in addition to her sister, to make them rivals, to uncover the nakedness of one upon the other in her lifetime” (*Vayikra* 18:18). It seems that the Torah

wants to make sure that sisters, who naturally love each other, do not come to see each other as enemies. However, if a wife dies, the Torah allows and even encourages the marriage of the surviving sister and the widower. This is because we can assume that in a household which lost its homemaker, the person most likely to be able to maintain a similar home environment would be the sister of the departed wife.

One of the seven Noachide laws is a ban on sexual immorality. Is marrying two sisters included in this prohibition? Some say that it is. When the Torah speaks of marrying two sisters, it uses the word “*tikach*” (take). This is the same verb used later in the Torah to refer to the mitzva of taking a wife. Thus they argue that the prohibition relates specifically to Jewish marriage (*kiddushin*), rather than to sexual relations. *Kiddushin* is a halachic framework relevant only to Jews but not to Noachides (non-Jews). Indeed, Ramban (in his commentary on *Yevamot* 97a) and many other *Rishonim* (medieval rabbis) see this as the reason that Yaakov was permitted to marry two sisters. Since the Torah had not yet been given, he was considered a Noachide.

However, others disagree. They point to the verse that introduces all the forbidden sexual relationships, “Any man shall not approach his close relative to uncover nakedness” (*Vayikra* 18:6). The verse is inclusive, with “any man” including non-Jews as well. Those who follow this opinion need a different explanation for how Yaakov was allowed to marry two sisters. One possibility, suggested by Ramban in his Torah commentary, is that as long as Yaakov lived outside the Land of Israel, he was not subject to the commandments, and, therefore, was permitted to marry two sisters. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Yaakov and Leah had their first (perhaps only) argument on the morning after the wedding feast. He had expected Rachel to join him in his abode that night but, unknown to him until morning's light, “behold, it was Leah” (*Beraishis* 29:25).

Midrash Rabbah (*ibid*) recounts how our forefather exclaimed “Deceiver, daughter of deceiver! Did I not call out 'Rachel' and you answered me?”

Leah well parried the thrust: “Is there a barber without apprentices? Did your father not call out 'Esav' and you answered?”

Touche.

But the Torah isn't a drama presentation. And the Torah doesn't criticize either subterfuge. What are we to glean about our lives from that comeback? On the most simple level, I think it conveys something about how we -- whether we are teachers, parents or just people (because all of us are examples to those around us) -- convey less (if anything) with words than we do

with our actions.

I learned that lesson well, if a bit embarrassingly, many years ago, when I was typing away on a keyboard and my four-year-old son sat down on the floor near my desk with a pegs-and-holes toy, which his imagination had apparently repurposed into a word processor (this was B.C. -- Before Computers), and proceeded to imitate me.

It was very cute, and I smiled. Until, that is, his little sister crawled over and tugged at him. Showing annoyance, he turned to her and said, loudly and tersely, "Will you please stop? Can't you see I'm working?" Yes, he was, as they say in the theater, inhabiting his character.

One of the answers to the Chanukah question of why the cohanim needed to find a sealed flask of oil despite the fact that tum'a hutra b'tzibbur -- ritually defiled entities are permitted in many cases for public use -- is attributed to the Kotzker Rebbe. He explained that that principle does not apply when a crucial, new era is being initiated, which was the case when the Chashmonaim rededicated the Bais Hamikdash. At so important a time, purity cannot be compromised.

The term for "initiation" is chinuch. And it is also used to mean "education." When we educate others, especially the young, we do well to ensure that our actions are pure. ©2024 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Ya'akov Bargains with Elokim

After Ya'akov left his parents' house and started his trip to Haran, he came to the mountain where his father had been placed on the sacrificial altar. There he spent the night, had the famous dream of the angels ascending and descending a ladder to the heavens, and realized that he was in a Holy place, a place where Hashem spoke directly to his forefathers. He established a memorial by taking the stone that had supported his head when he slept, pouring oil over it, and declaring that this place should be known as Bet El, the House of G-d.

In the dream, Hashem stood over Ya'akov and said, "I am Hashem, the Elokim of Avraham, your father, and the Elokim of Yitzchak; the ground upon which you are lying, to you I will give it and to your descendants. Your offspring shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall burst forth westward, eastward, northward, and southward; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and by your offspring. Behold, I am with you; and I will guard you wherever you go, and I will return you to this soil; for I will not forsake you until I have done what I have spoken for you."

After Ya'akov awoke from the dream and anointed the memorial, he repeated Hashem's promise to him as a contract: "Then Ya'akov took a vow, saying,

'If Elokim will be with me, and He will guard me on this way that I am going; and He will give me bread (food) to eat and clothes to wear; and I will return in peace to my father's house, and Hashem will be an Elokim to me -- then this stone which I have set as a pillar shall become a House of Elokim, and whatever You will give me, I shall surely tithe it to You.'"

Upon examination, it appears that the Ya'akov's statement parallels the promise from Hashem, but there are nuances which add to Hashem's promise in Ya'akov's vow. Hashem promises to Ya'akov that He will give the land that was promised to his fathers to Ya'akov and his children, but Ya'akov leaves that promise out of his repetition of Hashem's promises. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that one of the problems associated with such a vow is that it is impossible to know the future. Ya'akov would well be able to judge if Hashem had given him protection, food, and clothing, yet the promise of children might well come after he returned to the Land. Since Ya'akov would not be able to verify that condition of Hashem's promise to him, Ya'akov omitted that promise in his conditional vow.

Ya'akov also does not mention Hashem's description of his descendants as dust of the land and that they would spread to the West, East, North, and South because this promise does not mean the same as the promise made to Avraham. That comparison to dust was involving the inability to count Avraham's children and their spreading throughout the land. Sforno understood that these aspects of Hashem's blessing were already given through Avraham and did not have to be repeated here. Sforno and others believe that Ya'akov was being warned of the sh'pheitut, the dark lows of the exile from the Land, when the Jews, like dust, would be spread throughout the world, separated from their homeland, awaiting their return to their land. Hashem's promise also included returning Ya'akov to the Land, and that Hashem would not abandon him until He had fulfilled all that He had promised.

Ya'akov set up a memorial pillar and then spoke to Hashem. The Midrash implies that Ya'akov made this vow as a demonstration to future generations that they should vow to perform a righteous act when times are difficult and distressful: "The merit of the good deed protects him and rescues him from trouble." Even if one is unable to perform the vow, we learn in Gemara Kiddushin (40a), "Hashem considers a good intention as tantamount to a deed." Generally, vows are discouraged except in times of distress because one can be punished for not fulfilling a vow.

Ya'akov's vow began with the word "if." Ya'akov's vow seems unnecessary and unusual since it repeats the promises that Hashem had already made to him in his dream. Our Rabbis grapple with Ya'akov's intentions, as it appears to question Hashem's promises. The Ramban insists that this does not mean that Ya'akov doubted Hashem's spoken promise, but instead that

Ya'akov was concerned that his sins would make him unworthy of the full promise. Only truly righteous people understand that one should not take one's righteousness for granted, as the slightest sin of a righteous person is weighed heavily against him. HaAmek Davar suggests that Ya'akov was speaking here about his children, not himself. His bargain with Hashem was that Hashem would guard his children when they would eventually go into exile.

Ya'akov repeated Hashem's promise of guarding him, as the Midrash explains, Ya'akov wished protection from "idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, and slander." Ya'akov included in his vow, "bread to eat and clothes to wear." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Ya'akov could have asked just for "food and clothing," and wonders why Ya'akov added "to eat" and "to wear." He explains that food without the health to eat it would have been disastrous; clothing without it being the right size, would have been of no real value. Sforno suggests that without food or clothing under Hashem's protection, Ya'akov would have been forced into poverty, and this could have caused Ya'akov to rebel against Hashem.

Hashem promised Ya'akov that He would return him to this Land, but Ya'akov said, "and I will return in peace to my father's house." There are several differences in Ya'akov's statement as compared to Hashem's promise. Gur Aryeh understood that Hashem would return Ya'akov in peace, making Ya'akov's statement somewhat disrespectful, as if he distrusted Hashem's promise. But Ya'akov attributed the action to himself (I will return), so he hoped that his return would be peaceful. One could also understand Ya'akov's statement differently if one views the translation of the word "b'shalom" as "whole" or "intact". Ya'akov was concerned that his time with Lavan might alter his complete devotion to Hashem.

Ya'akov promised that he would give Hashem one tenth of everything that Hashem would give him. Radak understood this to mean that he would even give one tenth of his children to serve Hashem. Levi was chosen, as the Midrash explains, because he was the son most involved in serving Hashem, and Ya'akov taught him the wisdom of the Torah. Levi's children became the Priests (Kohanim) and their assistants (Leviim). May we, as children of Ya'akov, also dedicate our lives to studying the Torah and observing its commandments. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"**A**nd behold Hashem was standing upon it..." (Beraishis 28:13) Enroute to his uncle Lavan's home, Yaakov had a dream as he passed the place where the Bais HaMikdash would ultimately be built. In his dream, he saw a ladder, planted on the earth, with its top reaching to the sky. Angels were traveling up and down the ladder, and he perceived Hashem's

presence on it as well.

Though the word 'alav' could mean, "upon it," referring to the ladder, it could also mean, "upon him," referring to Yaakov. It seemed Hashem was standing over Yaakov. Why? Rashi and others say it was to protect Yaakov.

The angels Hashem had sent to escort Yaakov, had a "changing of the guard." The angels who accompanied him in the land of Canaan, the land promised to Avraham and Yitzchak, were ascending to Heaven, and other angels were descending in order to accompany Yaakov outside the land. During that time, Yaakov was vulnerable. Therefore, Hashem, Himself, stood by, watching over Yaakov to guard him.

The Ohr HaChaim adds that the word, "upon him," applies to Yaakov inasmuch as the Avos were the carriers of Hashem's throne, and Yaakov was leaned upon more heavily than the others because he completed the throne. (As the third generation, Yaakov built on what Avraham and Yitzchak had done before and with his Torah, completed Hashem's chariot.) Thus, Yaakov felt Hashem "leaning" on him, as it were.

Hashem then told Yaakov that the land upon which he was laying would be given to him and his children, just as it was promised to his father and grandfather. Interestingly, it is this land about which the Torah writes, "always, Hashem, your G-d's, eyes are upon it." (Devarim 11:12)

In the place where Hashem promised to give Yaakov the land which had His undivided attention, we find that Hashem gave Yaakov the same attention, guarding over him when the angels could not. What can we learn from this?

Perhaps we can understand just how involved Hashem is with our lives. Not only Yaakov, but each of us, is worthy of the personal attention of Hashem. While the messengers He sends may come and go, Hashem is still there. If we think that a particular person or circumstance will be the vehicle of our salvation, we can become discouraged if they don't come through or it doesn't work out. But we shouldn't. That's because messengers are just messengers, and Hashem has many more.

Regardless of what the messengers do, it is Hashem, Himself, who is looking after us.

A childless couple came to their Rebbe in tears. They had been married for many years and wanted a child desperately. The Rebbe heard their pleas, and felt very bad for them, but told them, "I'm so sorry, but I can't help you. I see that you are not destined to have children."

The husband, a devout follower of the Rebbe, was crushed, but accepted his lot with faith. Not so his wife. Incensed, she said, "Let's get out of here. We don't need a Rebbe who tells us we can't have children. We will go daven to Hashem on our own and we'll see that He will answer us!"

Indeed, the couple was answered just a few months later when they found out the woman was expecting a child. The Rebbe was right when he said he could not help them, because it was not the Rebbe's prayers they needed - but their own. ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Well Check-Up

Fleeing from his brother Esav, Yaakov travels to his uncle Lavan in Charan; as he nears the town, he sees a peculiar sight. He sees a field and in the middle of it, he spots a well with a large rock placed upon its mouth. Three flocks of sheep with their shepherds nearby are standing near it, waiting to be watered. But the shepherds are just standing and waiting. It seems that they have no work to do and are about to take the sheep back to their pens. The flocks are crouching and waiting for something. Yaakov is very curious. So Yaakov greets them, "My brothers!" he begins. "Where are you from?" They tell him that they are from Charan. Yaakov inquires about the welfare of Lavan and his family, and then Yaakov asks the question. "The day is yet large; it is not yet time to bring the sheep back. Why don't you water the sheep and continue grazing?" (Genesis 29:4-7) Rashi explains the verse in detail. "If these are your sheep," Yaakov asks, "then why don't you give them their water? And," Yaakov continues "if you are working for someone else, then why are you just sitting here?"

The shepherds explain to Yaakov that they would like to water the sheep but unless a large group of shepherds arrive, they cannot. It is impossible to lift the rock and draw water. Therefore they sit and wait each day until enough shepherds arrive to give lift the rock (Genesis 29:8). It seems to be a fair and understandable exchange except for one word. Yaakov began the conversation with a term of endearment. "My brothers!" No pun intended, but Yaakov did not know these shepherds from Adam!

Why did he begin his question with words that seem to show an affinity that could not have yet been forged? He just met these men, why does he call them brothers?

I recently heard a wonderful story about someone I know dearly: A prominent Chassidic Rebbe was not feeling all that well so his doctor recommended that he go for a comprehensive cardio-vascular examination including a stress test, echo-cardiogram and a slew of other tests would be beneficial. He recommended a prominent cardiologist, Dr. Paul Fegil (not his real name), who headed the cardiology department of a large medical center in Manhattan.

Waiting for the doctor to arrive, the Rebbe felt very uncomfortable in the unfamiliar surroundings. He barely responded to the nurse's questions pertaining to his medical health and history. The nurse was frustrated

as the Rebbe almost refused to discuss his symptoms. It got worse. When the nurse began attaching electrodes to all parts of his chest, he began to sweat. He became so nervous that the monitors and other meters connected to the wires began to pulsate wildly.

The nurse was astounded by the very erratic movements on the heart monitor. Never having seen lines jump off the monitor like that, the nurse quickly ran out of the examining room to summon the esteemed cardiologist immediately. Meanwhile, the Rebbe was still sweating profusely as his heart was pounding wildly.

All of a sudden the door opened and in walked Dr. Fegil. He was a distinguished looking man with graying hair a warm smile and a small leather yarmulke on his head. He stood at the opening, and exclaimed to the Rebbe. "Sholom Aleichem! Rebbe! HaKol B'seder? Is everything OK?" Hearing those familiar words, the Rebbe became startled. He picked up his head and saw the doctor. He could not believe it Dr. Paul Fegil was one of his own! Almost magically, the bells and whistles that were muddling the monitor suddenly stopped. Immediately all the readings showed a sign of a very normal heart beat! Minutes later the Rebbe told the nurse every one of his maladies and his entire medical history as well!

Dr. Fegil looked at the nurse and laughed. "Sometimes a few haimishe words can fix more problems than open-heart surgery!"

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, explained that Yaakov approached a group of shepherds whom he had never met. He wanted to admonish them in a gentle manner while finding out what was transpiring at the well. After all, he was puzzled, why were they just sitting around waiting. However, Yaakov was smarter than just to criticize. He knew that unless he both called and considered them as brothers they would turn a deaf ear.

It was only after they explained to him that until all the shepherds gathered to lift the rock, they could do nothing, did Yaakov understand that his complaints were unjustified. But Yaakov had no problems presenting his critique to the shepherds for one simple reason. He began with one simple exclamation. "My brothers." Yaakov approached them by exclaiming, "Brothers! Where are you from?" The moment he initiated the concept of brotherhood, any suggestion -- even criticism -- would be allowed. Criticisms, even constructive ones, are difficult, but Yaakov taught us a lesson: Before you can espouse your druthers, make sure that you are talking to brothers!

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