

UNDERSTANDING TRUE VALUE IN THIS WORLD

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. Hashem Helps us to Help Ourselves

We read in this week's parsha that after Yaakov awoke from his prophetic dream on Mount Moriah, he took the stones that he had placed under his head and created a monument called Beth-el. Here he took a vow, "If G-d will be with me, will guard me on this way that I am going; will give me bread to eat and clothes to wear; and I return in peace to my father's house, and Hashem will be a G-d to me- then this stone which I have set up as a pillar shall become a house of G-d." To what was Yaakov referring when he said "guard me on this way"? Was he concerned about physical harm from Lavan? Hashem had already promised Yaakov that he would return him home unharmed.

As the Yalkut explains, Yaakov understood the type of community he was entering. Lavan's community was the antitheses of Eretz Yisroel and his parent's home. Murder, idolatry, and adultery were not unusual for Lavan's community. Yaakov was concerned that he would be exposed to the many negative influences there and did not want his spirituality to be affected; he therefore requested from Hashem- "guard me on this way". The Yalkut says that Yaakov wanted Hashem's protection from the influences of murder, idolatry, adultery and loshon hora "evil speech". On one hand Yaakov asked for protection from some of the most severely negative influences (murder, idolatry, and adultery) and at the same time he specified loshon hora as being on the same level as these other crimes. Why does Yaakov include loshon hora along with the other three negative influences? How is loshon hora related to murder, idolatry, and adultery?

If a person were to value another human as a creation of Hashem, who is made in His image, that person would not commit murder. The person would not be even tempted to commit murder because they would acknowledge and believe in the innate value of the other human being. The only way a person could take a life, G-d forbid, is if they can in some way undervalue or justify that the other person is not worth existing. What is loshon hora? Loshon hora is evil talk about another person or gossip that is justified by the belief that in some way the subject of the loshon hora does not have sufficient value to merit respect as a human being. It is a way of undermining the existence of another person. With the justification that "I am who I am" and "he is less than I am" it is easy to dismiss the value of another person and elevate one's own self-image. The perpetrator of loshon hora becomes a judge of value in the world independent of all other factors. This is the same as an idolater who picks and chooses which deity to worship depending on their own value judgment.

As the Gemara states Hashem says that there is not enough room in the world for Him and an arrogant person. Haughtiness drives away Hashem because the egoist is consumed with his own self worth and has little concern for anything else. Adultery is also similar to loshon hora because the adulterer justifies his behavior by believing that the married individual's partner is valueless and therefore almost non-existent. Where does the undermining of human value begin which ultimately can lead to murder, adultery and idol worship? The answer is loshon hora. Yaakov understood that the destructive cycle does not begin with murder but rather with loshon hora. Yaakov understood the subtle influences of loshon hora and this is why he asks Hashem to protect him from evil speech.

We can all say that we could never commit murder or the other three sins listed by Yaakov; however, the yeitzer ha'ra (evil inclination) is powerful and cunning. That is true for the moment. The Gemara says that unless Hashem assists us to understand and grasp our weaknesses and our inclination we would be completely consumed by it. We could easily move from loshon hora to much graver manifestations of our yeitzer ha'ra without Hashem's assistance. How does Hashem assist us? He gave us a mechanism, an illuminator - the Torah. The Gemara says that Hashem gave us a powerful inclination, which has the power to consume us; but he also gave us the antidote by which we can understand our inclination and defeat it. This is accomplished through Torah study. Torah study gives us clarity and objectivity in order to not stumble even on the more subtle distractions from the yeitzer ha'ra which ultimately, G-d forbid, lead to serious consequences.

2. Hashem's Relationship with the World

This week's parsha begins, "Yaakov departed from Beer-sheva and went toward Charan." Why is it important that the Torah tell us that Yaakov "departed from Beer-sheva"? One would think that the location that Yaakov was heading for would be the main fact conveyed by the pasuk? Rashi cites the Midrash to explain the purpose of "Yaakov departed from Beer-sheva". The Midrash says that when a tzaddik leaves a location the "beauty", "glory", and "splendor" of that location leaves with him. The tzaddik's departure leaves a void where there had once been grandeur. The tzaddik is the location's glory and source of importance. How should we understand this?

We read in the Torah that when the Shechina "Glory of Hashem" came upon Mount Sinai, no one was permitted to touch the mountain because it was intensely "holy". When Hashem's presence departed from the mountain, it returned to its ordinary status. Mount Sinai returned to being a mountain like all others. The Gemara teaches us from this that it is not the location that glorifies the person but rather the person that glorifies the location. The mountain was special only when Hashem was present on the mountain. It is Hashem's association with the location that gave it its special elevated status.

We find that Eretz Yisroel is referred to as the "holy land". What is the source of its level of holiness? It cannot originate from the land or the soil - there must be another reason. Evidently it must be that Hashem identifies with the land just as He identified with Mount Sinai during the giving of the Torah.

Because of Hashem's level of holiness, everything closely associated with him becomes holy. Why are the Jews referred to as the "holy nation"? What gives Am Yisroel its inherent holiness? It must be because of our relationship to Hashem. Hashem has a special intimate relationship with the Jewish people, which is on an ongoing basis.

If a tzaddik lives in a particular city is it the location that is special or is it because of Hashem's identification with the location. Why does Hashem associate with that location? Evidently it is because of His special relationship with the tzaddik. In this sense, the location where the tzaddik dwells takes on a status that is similar to that of Eretz Yisroel to a degree due to Hashem's relationship with the location through the tzaddik. The Gemara tells us in Berachos that Reb Yochanon, the author of the Jerusalem Talmud, heard that there were aged people living in Bavel "Babylon". Reb Yochanon could not understand this because there is an explicit pasuk in the Torah that states that Hashem will only prolong the lives of people who dwell in the land, which is promised He promised to our Forefathers - meaning Eretz Yisroel. However, Reb Yochanon heard that there were people with long lives living outside of Eretz Yisroel. He wondered how the people in Bavel could have merited lengthened days since they were not in Eretz Yisroel? The Gemara explains that Reb Yochanon was informed that these people in Bavel came early to shul in the morning and stayed in shul late in the evening. From this, Reb Yochanon understood why they merited long lives. How are we to understand this? The pasuk states that one must be living "on the land" in order to merit a long life?

The Maharsha explains that going to shul is similar in certain respects to going to Eretz Yisroel. How is going to shul imilar to going ot Eretz Yisroel? We learned earlier that Eretz Yisroel has a special holy status only because Hashem associates with the land. A shul is a location where a minyan gathers to acknowledge Hashem. We also learn that Hashem's presence intensifies in the context of a minyan. Hashem calls the shul a Migdash May'at "a semblance of the Bais Ha'Migdash (the Hole Temple)". Since Hashem identifies with the shul it is similar to Eretz Yisroel.

The Gemara in Megilah tells us that the status of a bais ha'mirdash "place of Torah learning" has a higher status of holiness than a shul. This is because the bais ha'midrash's primary use is the study of Torah and Hashem identifies himself intensely with Torah study. This helps us understand the meaning of " Hashem, the Torah, and the Jewish people" are all one. This means wherever the Jewish people are there is Hashem. Wherever there is Torah study Hashem is present. All of these entities are closely inter-related.

We read the Prophets that before King David brought back the Holy Ark; it was in an orchard that belonged to a non-Jew. This orchard had great blessing and yielded phenomenal profits because the Holy Ark was located in the orchard. The Holy Ark is a location where the Shechina dwells. We can see that wherever Hashem is present great blessing is present and wherever He is not present there is no blessing, G-d forbid.

How does one guarantee blessing in their life - it is by being associated with Hashem. How is that relationship possible? - through the study of Torah and attending praying with a minyan.

3. Investing in True Value

The Torah tells us in this week's parsha, "Yaakov worked seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him a few days because of his love for her." Because of Yaakov's intense love for Rachel his seven years of hard labor under Lavan quickly. The question is- usually we find that if one desires something the time which passes in anticipation seems to pass very slowly; yet, we see that with Yaakov the opposite is true, How can we understand this?

Let us start by understanding why Yaakov loved Rachel. Was it Rachel's physical beauty or was it some other quality? The moment Yaakov, who was 84 years old, saw Rachel he knew that she was destined to be his wife. We learn in the parsha that when Yaakov slept on Mount Moriah, he placed stones around his head and when he awoke the stones had become one. The Chazal tell us that there were twelve stones that Yaakov placed under his head and that when they fused into one he knew that he would be the Patriarch who would father the twelve tribes. Hashem indicated to him through the fusing of the stones that he was going to be the father of the Jewish people. Yaakov therefore knew that his wife needed to be a uniquely qualified individual.

We find that there are two types of love: Love that is contingent on a number of issues and Love that is not contingent on any external issues. The second type of love is based solely on the value and qualities of the individual. When the Torah says, "Yaakov loved her" (regarding Rachel), we can understand that Yaakov's love for Rachel was based solely on his recognition of her intrinsic value and qualities as a person. In Yaakov's assessment, Rachel's value was infinite in nature because of her future role in giving birth to the Jewish people. If there is a Klal Yisroel then there is an existence. Without Klal Yisroel the entirety of creation would cease to be. Therefore when "Yaakov loved her" it was due to his comprehension of Rachel's great value to the entirety of existence. We can understand that since Yaakov understood that Rachel had infinite value, seven years of hard labor was negligible payment for receiving Rachel. Therefore seven years of time passed as if it were only a few days because Yaakov loved Rachel, which means that he appreciated her infinite value and seven years of labor was nominal.

This is similar to Avraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah from Ephron. Chazal tell us that although Avraham in fact paid millions of dollars to acquire the Machpelah it was not even a fraction of its worth. Avraham understood the incalculable value of the Machpelah as the gateway for nishamos "souls" ascending to heaven. This is the reason why any price paid for the Machpelah would have been negligible compared with its true value.

The Torah tells us in Chumash Devarim, that Moshe said to Klal Yisroel that he was placing before them two paths: one of death and one of life and Moshe encouraged them to take the path of life. This seems like an obvious choice? Can you imagine if one had to choose between life and death?

We would definitely choose life! Yet we see that Moshe needed to encourage and plead with Klal Yisroel to choose life. How do we understand this? The Midrash explains this pasuk through an analogy. The Midrash says that an aged man was sitting at a crossroad. On the right side the road appeared difficult to navigate. Holes, obstacles and various obstructions made the road on the right appear undesirable. The road on the left side, by contrast, appeared completely free and clear of any difficulties. As far as eye could see, the left road was ideal for traveling and the obvious choice. A traveler came to the crossroad and after looking in both directions, decided to take the road to the left, which was seemingly the obvious choice. The aged man noticed this and stopped the traveler before he started down the left road and explained to him that his perception and understanding of the roadways was incorrect. The left road was clear as far as the eye could see, which was equivalent to a three day walk. However, beyond the three-day point the left road becomes impossible to traverse. The road on the right by contrast, while it appears riddled with obstructions, becomes completely clear and more fully accommodating after a three-day walk.

From this we can understand Moshe's pleading with Klal Yisroel to take the path of life. Moshe said to Klal Yisroel that even though life may at times seem difficult and the challenges insurmountable, they should chose a life in the way of Torah and Mitzvos. Life is only seventy years while the world to come is eternal. Therefore one's lifespan is relatively meaningless in comparison. What is a seventy year investment compared to eternity? This is why Moshe encouraged the Klal Yisroel to choose life. Moshe says this only because he was able to perceive life clearly for what it is. When Yaakov saw Rachel he did not simply perceive a person; but rather he saw the infinite value of Rachel because of her role in the creation of the twelve tribes. This is why seven years is like a few days - it is a matter of perceiving reality correctly.

How do we conduct ourselves? Are we able to perceive the value of our actions? If a person studies Torah, the value of that time devoted to studying has infinite value. If a person understood this clearly would he ever pass up the opportunity to study Torah? There is no other involvement that would come close to any degree to the infinite value of studying Torah. Yet we see that it is easy to get distracted and not have the clarity needed to perceive the true value of our actions. We must pray to have the clarity to understand the opportunity at hand and only then would we appreciate this and be beholden to Hashem.

Copyright © 2002 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Kalatsky is the founder of the [Yad Avraham Institute](#), a New York-based learning center whose mission is to disseminate Torah to Jews of all backgrounds and walks of life.