

WORDS LIKE ARROWS

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

There is an interesting Midrashic interpretation of two words in this week's portion that seem to contrast starkly with their simple meaning. In fact, on the surface the interpretation seems even to contradict the simple meanings!

Yaakov blesses Yoseph's children and then tells Yoseph, "as for me, I have given you Shechem one portion more than your brothers, which I took from the Emorite with my sword and with my bow."

Rashi explains that after the brothers attacked the city of Shechem in response to the assault on their sister Deena, the Emorites, a neighboring country, tried to conquer Yaakov at his time of weakness, similar to Jordan's joining against Israel in the Six-Day War. They, too, were miraculously defeated.

So Yaakov tells Yoseph that he acquired those lands with his sword and bow. But Rashi and the Targum Unkeles, who is known for his almost literal translation of the Torah, deviate and translate the words bow and sword in a different light. Rashi explains they are wisdom and prayer, and the Targum explains the words as two forms of supplication.

The allegory is understandable. Prayer surely surpasses the pen in its might over the sword. And some prayers, like a sword, are strong and sweeping and affect all those they strike. Others, like an arrow, reach one specific point from a far distance. The question is: we know that Yaakov prayed. Of course, he prayed! Yaakov's prayers are documented throughout the Book of Genesis. He prays throughout his encounters with his adversaries, yet this time he chose to talk about his battle prowess. Why then translate his expression of utensils of war as prayer?

The Ponovezer Rav, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, of blessed memory, was renowned for his efforts in rebuilding Torah from the ashes of the Holocaust. He established the jewel in the crown of the Torah city of B'nai Berak by building the Ponovez Yeshiva and its myriad affiliate institutions. He built a Yeshiva for pre-teens, another for young men, and still a third for married scholars. He built the Batei Avos, a huge housing complex with hundreds of subsidized apartments for needy families. He built schools for orphaned boys and girls in B'nei Berak, Ashdod, and numerous cities across the State of Israel.

Often, he would visit wealthy patrons in the United States, Canada, South Africa, and Europe, and appealed to them to contribute monies for the Ponovezer Institutions.

The story is told, perhaps apocryphally, that one particular donor once confronted him in jest.

"Why is it, Rabbi Kahaneman," he wondered, "that all the other Rabbis and Roshei Yeshiva who visit me never mention money? All they talk about is Torah and mitzvos. But you come here and cut right to the chase. You don't talk about Torah or mitzvos. Your appeal, however, is, direct and to the point. You come here and say that you need one hundred thousand dollars to finish a girls school in Ashdod. Why don't you also give me a speech about Torah, mitzvos, and Jewish continuity?"

Rabbi Kahaneman did not draw back. He took the man's hand and looked him in the eye. Then he told him a profound statement. "You know me well. Many fund raisers talk, 'Torah, Torah, Torah,' but they mean money, money, money. I talk money, but I mean Torah, Torah, Torah."

Our Chazal, who understood the essence of Yaakov's being; who saw his deep faith in running from Esav, fighting with the angel, and confronting the tragedy of Shechem; and who appreciated his travail with Lavan, understood quite well what his bow and sword were. They were very comfortable with the greatness of Yaakov's persona, one steeped in a spirituality constantly connected to his Creator.

They understood that when Yaakov said sword he meant the swift and sharp result of prayer, and when he said bow and arrow he meant the piercing cry of supplication.

Every word, even the seemingly mundane words, of our forebears, were the foundation of our faith and are filled with spiritual meaning. Everything pointed to the One Above.

It is when we as temporal beings preach prayer and espouse faith, that we must be suspect. Do we really mean prayer & faith or are we just talking prayer but thinking bows & arrows?

Dedicated by Geoffry & Yardena Miller in memory of Joseph K. Miller of blessed memory HY"D 14 Teves

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PARABOLIC REFLECTIONS

In Parshas Noach's Drasha I wrote, "Recently, a billion dollar project to Mars was destroyed because the language of the metric system was spoken in one factory and feet and inches were spoken in the other."

I received this brief letter from Harvey Schabes, a NASA engineer.

"Just a brief note from your friendly NASA Engineer: I am almost positive that the Mars project was in the low hundreds of millions and not billions. But what's a few million between friends."

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Drasha is the e-mail edition of FaxHomily, a weekly torah facsimile on the weekly portion which is sponsored by ***The Henry and Myrtle Hirsch Foundation***

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