

IMPROBABLE APPROACHES

by Rabbi Label Lam

And Yaakov settled in the land of his fathers' sojourning in the land of Canaan. These are the generations (results) of Yaakov---Yosef was seventeen years old and he was youthful... (Breishis 37:1-2) And Yaakov settled...Yaakov wanted to settle down in tranquility, so the whole tempest of Yosef leapt upon him. Righteous people seek to settle in tranquility in this world?! To this The Almighty says: "Isn't it enough for the righteous ones what's prepared for them in the next world and then they look to settle tranquilly here!?" (Rashi)

Yaakov had a very unsettled life. He was constantly on the move, in exile, or a victim fugitive struck with wave after wave of difficulties. Finally, in the "golden years", with a large and capable family around him Yaakov looks to retreat once again to the contemplative life of his early youth. Suddenly he is jolted as never before sending him into a twenty two-year tailspin with the loss of his son Yosef. What's so bad about Yaakov settling down for a period?

On an extremely hot day, a man meanders down the street on his way to the bank. In his pocket is a check for \$5 million. The sun is practically unbearable and he is near dehydration as he nears his final destination. Ready to make the deposit and one block away he beholds, like an oasis, a lemonade stand. There stands a group of little kiddies with their misspelled backward lettered sign and the going price list. The thirsty fellow opts for two 7ounce cups for 10 cents each.

He gulps them down with great ease and delight. When it comes time to pay he fishes around in his pocket and finds no loose change. His creditors stare him down demanding with serious looks their 20 cents balance due. Under great duress he pulls out the big check and hands it over. The kiddies fish through the old cigar box for change and only manage to come up with a 73 cents, a few buttons, and a dead fly. The formerly thirsty fellow accepts his change and continues blithely on his way.

When I tell these kinds of stories to my kids, they always ask, "But Abba is it true? Did it really happen?" I never know what to answer. On the one hand I made it up. However, on some level it's so true and it happens every day to many of us. How is it so? The Talmud tells us there is no reward for performance of commandments in this world. This world has not the currency; the exchange rate differential is too great to receive what the true world of spirit has to offer. To cash that check for a pizza or a car or a condo one might have to accept a cheap handful of change in return.

With such a perspective we have something better than an answer to one of many questions that

are often asked, for example "why the righteous suffer". One of my teachers offered the following distinction, which may prove enormously helpful. There is a difference to be made between "an answer" and "an approach". "An answer eliminates the question. If I would ask, "What is 2+2?" When you give the answer, "4", the question is effectively cancelled out and rendered unnecessary.

If, however, one wishes to know why one or many innocent or righteous persons live lives of hardship we are better equipped with "an approach". Whereas "an answer" negates the question, "an approach" allows the questioner to live with the question. We don't know "the answer" but it does not mean that the "the answer" on the deepest level is not known. We live with the knowledge that we do not know now. Perhaps, the real answer is due to one of hundreds or thousands of other reasons that we may or may not be aware of.

Yaakov was prevented for his own great good we are told, from cashing his check too soon. He suffered in silence for twenty-two years without his special son, Yosef, not knowing "the answers" all the time but enduring daily life-shattering questions with a pocketful of many probable and improbable approaches.

Good Shabbos!

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