

AS LONG AS THE CANDLE IS BURNING

by Rabbi Label Lam

"And he (Jacob) said to them, 'The day is yet great! It is not time to gather in the herds! Allow the sheep to drink and then and take them to pasture.'" (Breishis 29:7)

Of all the things in the universe, why does the Holy Torah tell us about Jacob's seemingly banal conversation with the shepherds? Why do we need to know that he urged them to not just laze around but to get busy with the business of shepherding?

In a similar spirit, it's told that Rabbi Yisrael Salanter zt"l once noticed an elderly shoe-maker working late into the night by the light of a small flickering flame. Reb Yisrael approached him and after engaging in conversation eventually registered his criticism. The old Jew understood that it looked as if work had overtaken his life but he answered back and said, "As long as the candle is burning there's still time to work and repair!"

When Reb Yisrael heard these words they went into his heart like an arrow. Here he came to offer a rebuke and he was struck with such a powerful aphorism in disguise. He was heard for weeks afterwards pacing in his room crying and repeating the words, "As long as the candle is burning there is still time to work and repair."

When the Dubner Maggid was asked why answered every question with a parable he is reported to have said, "I'll tell you a parable!"- In a certain town there was a person named Emes-Truth that always created a stir wherever he went because he was naked. There was always some sort of strong reaction to his presence and by most he was deemed a nuisance.

He had an old friend named Moshol-Parable who approached him one day and explained, "So many people are disturbed by your appearance. I have a helpful suggestion. If you were to wear one my suits then I think people will tolerate you, understand you, and even accept you." So it was that Emes- Truth put on one of Moshol-Parable's fine suits and he was able to be found mingling comfortably amongst the citizenry of the town, and his message could be heard.

It seems to be a part of human psychology that when faced with raw truth we all tend to shrink and hide. However, when we see it dressed up in a story or a metaphor we can afford to agree to the lesson before deciding first if it makes us uncomfortable. Reading about somebody else's foibles educates without tripping alarms, by artfully bypassing the defense mechanisms.

When we study Jacob's astounding record of industry and his achievement in life it seems so absurd

in contrast when confronting a scene where people are sitting idle in the midst of a day- in the midst of life. Jacob's soul calls out in protest. He works heroically long and difficult days and nights for the sake of honestly fulfilling his duties to Lavan while responsibly raising a large and noble family which is to be the foundation of the Jewish Nation. Look at what can be done with time.

If the Torah would have just said, "Don't be lazy!" "Do something with your life!"-we would have dodged it like a bullet. However watching it unfold dramatically before our eyes alerts us to the idea that there is yet plenty to learn and much do in this world as long as the candle is burning.

Good Shabbos!

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