

MIRACLE TREES

by Shlomo Katz

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Vayechi

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Today's Learning:

Shabbat 7:2-3

Orach Chaim 212:2-213:2

Bavli: Yevamot 25

Yerushalmi: Ketubot 59

R' Simcha Zissel Ziv z"l (the "Alter of Kelm"; died 1898) once wrote to his son: "I have never heard anybody say, 'Thank G-d I had enough to eat this year.' I have only heard people say, 'Thank G-d, I managed to put away some money this year to support me in the future.' I was therefore amazed to read that Yaakov, a wealthy man, the son and grandson of princes of the land, said, 'The G-d who watched over me' (Bereishit 48:15), a phrase which Onkelos renders: 'Hashem who fed me.'

"I continued to be amazed until I looked at the bentching/Birkat Hamazon, and then I became amazed at myself instead. I have been saying the words but not realizing what I was saying! After all, the entire Birkat Hamazon expresses our thanks for the gift of food which G-d gives us. We are impressed by the miracle of the mahn that rained down on Bnei Yisrael, yet we are not moved when

our sustenance comes to us every day. What fools we are!" (Ohr Rashaz, paragraph 177)

We would appreciate the miracle of our sustenance more, observed R' Yisroel Reisman shlita, if we looked at it from the perspective of someone who grew up on mahn. To such a person, the falling mahn was a natural occurrence; after all it happened very dependably every day. On the other hand, when this person arrived in Eretz Yisrael and saw that a seed placed in the ground can grow into a tree -- that, he thought, was a miracle!

"He maneuvered his hands because Menashe was the first- born."
(48:14)

R' Yisrael Isserlin z"l (the "Terumat Hadeshen"; 1390-1460) asks: Did the fact that Menashe was the first-born cause Yaakov to maneuver or cross his hands? It was the fact that Yaakov wanted to bless the younger brother, Ephraim, that caused Yaakov to cross his hands!

He writes: "My father's father, R' Chaim, who was nicknamed Henschel from Heinbrucke, son of our master and teacher Yisrael of Krems who wrote the Hagahot Ashery, answered that because Menashe was the first-born, Yaakov crossed his hands in order not to embarrass Menashe by making him switch sides. Our master and teacher R' Ozer praised this answer."

Another answer: Yaakov's primary goal was not to give the blessings to the younger son, Ephraim. Rather, it was to not give them to the older son, Menashe. "He maneuvered his hands because Menashe was the first-born," and he did not want to give the berachot to the older son. Why? Because the life of Yosef [and his children] was to parallel Yaakov's own life. [See Rashi 37:2.] Just as in Yaakov's family, the younger son (Yaakov) received the blessings, so Yaakov wanted it to be with Yosef's children.

(Beurei Mahari)

Why, asks R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l, are the Jewish people referred to as Bnei Yisrael/ children of Yisrael (Yaakov) more so than of Avraham and Yitzchak? The answer lies in our unique perspective on history and time, one which is different from that of other societies.

A Jew who observes the mitzvot - particularly one who studies Torah regularly - is a person who is capable of moving back-and- forth between generations and centuries without feeling the least bit disoriented or uncomfortable. One moment he is sitting in his home surrounded by every 20th century convenience; the next moment, he could be debating with the 12th century sage, Rambam. The continuity of the family and the community, and the passage of the mesorah (loosely translated: "heritage") from one generation to the next, is an important part of Judaism.

Nowhere in the Torah do we read that Avraham or Yitzchak had any contact with their grandchildren. Yaakov, however, is seen in this week's parashah blessing his grandsons and taking an interest in their development. Chazal say that he studied Torah with them every day that he was

in Egypt. He even calls them his sons. Because Yaakov represents that important ideal, we, too, are Bnei Yisrael/Yaakov's sons. (Reflections of the Rav II pp.15-23)

"Yissachar is a strong-boned donkey; he rests between the boundaries."
(49:14)

"A strong-boned donkey" - a strong-boned donkey who bears the yoke of Torah, like a strong donkey on whom they load a heavy burden. "He rests between the boundaries" - like a donkey that walks day and night and never rests indoors. When it wants to rest, it rests between the boundaries, on the outskirts of the cities to which it carries merchandise. (Rashi)

Our Sages teach that the tribe of Yissachar produced a disproportionate share of the members of the Sanhedrin and other Torah scholars. Yaakov's blessing to the progenitor of that tribe alludes to the reason for that tribe's success, as R' Yisrael Meir Kagan z"l (the "Chafetz Chaim") explains:

A talmid chacham/Torah scholar, like a donkey, toils day and night and does not rest or pursue physical pleasures. When does he rest a little bit? When he finishes a tractate, then he observes a yom tov [i.e., makes a siyum]. Afterward, he immediately returns to toiling in his studies, just as a donkey that has rested briefly on the outskirts of the city immediately returns to bearing its heavy burden.

The gemara (Avodah Zarah 5b) teaches: "One should always act in relation to his Torah studies as an ox to the yoke and a donkey to a burden." We have already seen what characteristic of a donkey the Torah scholar should emulate, but what about an ox? The Chafetz Chaim explains that just as an ox plows the ground, so a Torah scholar should strive to break new ground. One should not think that any portion of the Torah has already been examined so thoroughly that there is nothing else to discover in it. Rather, one should plow it again and again.

Another characteristic of a donkey is its ability to carry a large burden. After one has discovered the depths of Torah, he must carry the Torah with him in his heart, as it is written (Devarim 6:6): "And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your heart." (Shem Olam: Sha'ar Hachazakat Ha'Torah, Ch. 10)

R' Yosef Chaim of Baghdad z"l (died 1909) writes similarly that the ox, which plows, represents studying in depth, while the donkey, which carries a large burden, represents amassing extensive knowledge.

Why, he asks, didn't the gemara use a mule as its metaphor since a mule can carry more than a donkey? Because the mule is the product of kilayim/a mixture of two species, while Torah study must be pure of ulterior influences or motives. (Ben Yehoyada)

Letters from Our Sages

This week's letter is a congratulatory letter from five of Lithuania's leading rabbis to R' Samson Raphael Hirsch z"l on his appointment as rabbi of the Orthodox congregation in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. The letter is reprinted in *Shemesh Marpeh*, p.261.

Thursday, 22 Iyar 5621, Vilna [May 2, 1861]

May you carry away the blessing of "a thousand times" [see Devarim 1:11] from the G-d of the campaign [possibly referring to R' Hirsch's battle against the reform movement] . . . To the honorable rabbi who is renowned for his Torah knowledge and his fear [of Heaven] which precedes his Torah knowledge; his name is great among Yisrael, our rabbi and teacher, Shimson, may his light shine, who is called "Rav Hirsch," the av bet din/chief rabbinical judge and resh matah/town rabbi of Congregation Kehal Adat Yeshurun that is concerned with the word of Hashem and His holy Torah in Frankfurt am Main:

Greetings as are due to a trusted friend of the loyal congregation of Bnei Yisrael. You know well that although the mountains and hills and seas and rivers separate between us, but the souls of the children of Yaakov are bound together. [We wish] a life of contentment and much success and satiation of joy on your head . . .

Our friend! We have heard a great deal of your wisdom and your good deeds in sowing righteousness, after which salvation grows, through your efforts on behalf of the holy flock. More than that, we heard from our friend, the famous rabbi and gaon, Rabbi Gershon Tanchum of Minsk, of your talents - how you developed wondrous strategies and brought about salvation through your great efforts and strength, that you do not rest and are not silent [in your effort] to bring to light [that which] will strengthen the faith of our holy Torah.

Therefore, we, the community of Vilna, the most loyal and the oldest among the loyal cities of Bnei Yisrael, find ourselves obligated - because one is forbidden to have pleasure in this world without a blessing - to thank and praise Hashem that we have merited that even in this lowly generation there is a loyal shepherd to oversee in detail the good of our brethren Bnei Yisrael . . .

[Signed:] [R'] Shlomo Zalman Ze'ev [the Maggid of Vilna]

[R'] Yosef son of R' Meir of Slutsk [i.e., R' Yossele Feimer]

[R'] Yehoshua Isaac of Slonim [i.e., R' Eizele Charif]

[R'] Eliyah Shick of Lida

[R'] Yitzchak Elchanan son of R' Yisrael Isser [Spektor]

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Project Genesis](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.
