

PULLING THE STRINGS OF HISTORY

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Hamaayan / The Torah Spring
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Vayeishev

Volume XIV, No. 9
25 Kislev 5760
December 4, 1999

Today's Learning:

Bikkurim 4:5/Shabbat 1:1

Orach Chaim 203:1-3

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Yevamot 4

Correction: It was Seder Nashim, not Seder Mo'ed,
that Daf Yomi students began on Thursday

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Ketubot 38

At the beginning of our parashah, Rashi quotes the midrash which says, "Yaakov sought to settle down in tranquility, but the troubles with Yosef fell upon him. Hashem said, 'Is it not enough for tzaddikim that the World-to-Come is prepared for them? Do they desire tranquility in This World as well?'" It seems that Yaakov was wrong to seek tranquility after many years of wandering. Why was his wish improper?

R' Simcha Broide shlita (Chevron Yeshiva in Yerushalayim) explains: We know that Hashem has set aside an unimaginable reward in the World-to-Come to repay those who do His will. In This World,

Hashem demands that tzaddikim view that reward as so great that they have no right to expect anything else.

Our Patriarch Avraham risked his life to fight the Four Kings in order to save Lot. After he emerged victorious, Avraham was afraid that his miraculous victory had exhausted his merits and used up his reward. Avraham knew how great his own merits were and he knew that a fantastic reward awaited him. Nevertheless, he also knew that mortal man is incapable of grasping Hashem's ways. Perhaps the mere fact that man was created is a great enough kindness from Hashem to exhaust man's merits. Certainly, then, a miracle such as the one Avraham experienced might use up one's reward!

Yaakov himself said before he faced Esav, "I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have done for Your servant." How then could Yaakov think that he deserved to settle down in tranquility?!

(Of course, Yaakov had a rationale. He thought that such a life would enable him to serve Hashem better. What he failed to recognize, however, was that Hashem prefers when one serves Him with toil than when one serves Him in a state of tranquility.) (Sam Derech, II, p.93)

"So he [Yaakov] sent him [Yosef] from the valley of Chevron . . ."
(37:14)

Rashi comments: Is Chevron in a valley? Chevron is on a mountain! Rather, this refers to the 'deep' plan relating to the tzaddik who is buried in Chevron (i.e., Avraham), to bring about what was told to Avraham, "Your descendants will be foreigners in a land which is not theirs" (i.e., Egypt).

R' Mattisyahu Solomon shlita (Mashgiach at Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, N.J.) elaborates on Rashi's comment as follows:

This is a parashah in which all the major players make mistakes that not only have serious consequences, but also seem to us to be obvious errors. Yaakov openly favors one son over the others. Yosef persists in relating his dreams to his brothers despite their negative reactions. Yosef's brothers conspire to kill him and end up selling him into slavery.

How could so many intelligent people - indeed, prophets - make such blunders. The answer is that Yaakov, Yosef and his brothers were all "playing into the hands" of Hashem's master plan. This is what Rashi is telling us - every seemingly irrational event that occurred happened because of Hashem's "deep" plan.

This lesson, that Hashem stands behind the scenes pulling the strings of history, is so important that the Torah drew our attention to it by seemingly making a "mistake" (so-to-speak) and saying that Chevron is in a valley.

Another point regarding Hashem's hand in history: If we had been present when Yosef was sold into slavery, we would have thought it was an immense tragedy. Had we been present when Yaakov

traveled to Egypt to be reunited with Yosef, we would have rejoiced. Yet, we would have been wrong both times. Yosef's sale to Egypt was a good thing, for it led to his becoming viceroy and saving his family from famine. On the other hand, Yaakov's journey to Egypt was an unhappy event, for it was the beginning of the long exile in that land. (Matnat Chaim: Ma'amarim p. 56)

"And Reuven heard, and he saved him [Yosef] from their hand; he said, 'Let us not strike him mortally . . . Throw him into the pit in the wilderness . . . ' "

(37:21-22)

The gemara (Shabbat 24a) states that this pit was home to snakes and scorpions. The halachah is that if a man falls into a pit full of snakes and scorpions, he is deemed dead and his widow may remarry. Yet, the Torah refers to Reuven's act as saving Yosef!

In contrast, Yehuda convinced his brothers to remove Yosef from the pit and to sell him into slavery. Yet, the gemara (Sanhedrin 6a) says that whoever praises Yehuda for this angers Hashem. Why?

R' Chaim of Volozhin z"l (1749-1821) explained: Reuven caused Yosef to be lowered into a pit full of snakes and scorpions, but the pit was in Eretz Yisrael. Yehuda saved Yosef's physical life, but he caused Yosef to be taken out of Eretz Yisrael. It is far better, said R' Chaim, to remain in Eretz Yisrael surrounded by snakes and scorpions than to live outside of Eretz Yisrael. (Quoted in the journal Yeshurun Vol. VI, p. 200)

"And Reuven heard, and he saved him [Yosef] from their hand; he said, 'Let us not strike him mortally . . . Throw him into the pit in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him' - intending to rescue him from their hand, to return him to their father."

(37:21-22)

The midrash says (commenting on Shir Hashirim 7:14): "The dudaim/ jasmine flowers yield fragrance' - this refers to Reuven, who saved Yosef; 'and at our door are treats' - this refers to the light of Chanukah." What is the connection between Reuven's saving Yosef and Chanukah?

R' Yissachar Shlomo Teichtel z"l Hy"d (Slovakia; died 1945) explains: Numerous commentaries discuss the following famous question, known as the "Bet Yosef's question": If the Maccabees found a jug with enough oil to last for one day and the oil lasted for eight days, the miracle itself was seven days long. Why then is Chanukah celebrated for eight days?

One answer that is given (by R' David Halevi z"l, the "Taz") is that miracles always involve making something-out-of-something, not something-out-of-nothing. For example, we read in Melachim II (chapter 4) that the prophet Elisha caused a small amount of oil to fill dozens of jugs. He did not cause a miracle involving flour, bread or some other commodity because the widow did not have

any of those things. However, because she had a few drops of oil, he could cause the oil to "multiply" miraculously.

Similarly, writes the Taz, in order for the oil to "multiply" and last for eight days, there had to be a drop left at the end of the first day. This means, in turn, that less than one day's supply of oil was consumed during the first day that the menorah burned. Thus, the miracle did last more than seven days.

Of course, continues R' Teichtel, Hashem is capable of bringing about a miracle that involves something-out-of-nothing. However, the Taz's point is that to whatever extent a miracle can be made to appear more natural, Hashem prefers that.

How do we know this? R' Teichtel answers: The gemara says that the pit into which Yosef was thrown was home to snakes and scorpions. How then was Reuven saving Yosef by throwing him into this pit? The answer is that Reuven was counting on Hashem to save Yosef. But, if Reuven was counting on Hashem, why did he make any effort to save Yosef? Let Hashem do it! The answer is that Reuven knew that Hashem prefers that miracles be lessened.

Now we see the connection between Reuven's saving Yosef and Chanukah. Why do we observe Chanukah for eight days, not seven? Because, as Reuven taught us, Hashem prefers that miracles be lessened, and from this we know that some oil was left over after the first day. (She'eilot U'teshuvot Mishneh Sachir: Orach Chaim, Mahadura Tinyana No. 24)

Letters from Our Sages

This week's offering is not a letter but rather is an excerpt from one of the early commentators' writings on this week's parashah. The comments presented here are of interest because they offer a rare insight into the philosophy behind the particular commentator's work as a well as an autobiographical vignette.

The writer, R' Shmuel ben Meir z"l ("Rashbam"; 1085-1174), lived in France and was Rashi's grandson. In addition to his Torah commentary, Rashbam authored a Talmud commentary, part of which is printed in the standard edition of the Talmud. Rashbam writes:

Those who love intelligence will discern and understand that which our Rabbis taught us, "A verse does not depart from its plain sense" ("ein mikra yotzai mi'dei peshuto"). True, the primary purpose of the Torah is to teach us through the allusions, the stories, the laws and the ordinances; also through seemingly extra words, the Thirty Two Hermeneutic Principles of R' Eliezer the son of R' Yose Ha'gelili and the Thirteen Hermeneutic Principles of Rabbi Yishmael [which we use to interpret those seemingly extra words]. The earlier generations, in their piety, dealt primarily with derashot/hermeneutics, which are of primary interest. Thus, they were not accustomed to study the peshat/plain sense of the verses . . . As we find in Tractate Shabbat, one of the sages said, "I was

eighteen years old and I had studied the entire Talmud, but I did not know that a verse does not depart from its plain sense."

Our Rabbi, Shlomo [i.e., Rashil], the father of my mother, the light of the diaspora, who wrote commentaries on Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim, set his heart to explain the plain sense of the verses. However, I, Shmuel, the son of his son-in-law, Meir zatzal, debated with him and before him, and he admitted to me that if he had the time, he would have to go back and compose other commentaries based on the plain meanings which are revealed every day. [Rashbam then goes on to analyze how his predecessors interpreted the second verse in our parashah and to criticize those interpretations.]

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