

REMAINING WHOLE

by Shlomo Katz

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Today's Learning:

Yevamot 10:8-9

Orach Chaim 345:11-13

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Nazir 60

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Bava Batra 25

We read in this week's parashah of Yaakov's return from his exile in Charan. The Torah relates (33:18), "Yaakov arrived intact at the city of Shechem." Rashi explains: "Intact in body, for his limp was healed; intact with his wealth, despite having given Esav a large gift; intact with his Torah learning, for he did not forget it during his years in Lavan's house."

R' Menachem Mendel Schneerson z"l (1902-1994; the Lubavitcher Rebbe) explains that Yaakov's exile and return foreshadow three aspects our own exile and future return. First, Yaakov returned intact in body. An important part of our exile is our self-sacrifice for G-d, and our afflictions in exile result from Hashem's putting us to a test in order to arouse that power of self sacrifice. We are assured, however, that we will return from exile intact with our bodies. Indeed, once the Jewish people accomplish their divine service in exile, all their afflictions will become completely nullified, for in truth, they were never real - they were nothing but a test.

Second, Yaakov returned intact with his wealth. While in exile, the Jew is expected to descend from his intrinsically holy level and don mundane garments in order to transform the world and elevate it with him. In doing so, the Jew makes an investment in the world - himself. However, this descent is not permanent, and the Jew is assured that he will return to his former "wealth."

Finally, Yaakov returned intact with his Torah learning. One might fear that making the descent just referred to will cause him to forfeit whatever spiritual accomplishments he has achieved. However, we are assured that this will not occur. (The Chassidic Dimension p. 38, based on Likkutei Sichos Vol. XV, p. 265)

"Yaakov became very frightened . . ." (32:8)

Rashi (to verse 11) explains that Yaakov was afraid, notwithstanding Hashem's promise to protect him, because he was afraid that he had sinned and forfeited the protection that Hashem had promised him. Rambam (in Shemoneh Perakim, Ch. 7) writes further that Yaakov may be faulted for his fear.

Why? Shouldn't a person fear that he will lose Hashem's protection if he sins? R' Yitzchak Elchanan Waldshein z"l hy"d (Assistant Mashgiach in Yeshiva Ohel Torah in Baranovitch, Poland) explains as follows:

It's true that one who sins may forfeit the good that Hashem has promised him. However, the Torah commands us to have "bitachon" / trust in Hashem. This mitzvah was not given only to people who never sin; in fact, there is no such thing as a person who never sins! Rather, even one who sins must have bitachon.

Thus, at the very same time that Yaakov was afraid that he had sinned and forfeited the protection that Hashem had promised him, he should have had bitachon. He should not have feared Esav at all.

How should Yaakov's bitachon have expressed itself? R' Waldshein explains: The tenth century work Chovot Halevavot (Sha'ar Avodat Hashem, Ch. 6) observes that we are so busy asking Hashem to bestow kindness on us that we do not notice the kindness that He bestows on us without being asked. However, one who trusts in Hashem recognizes that Hashem takes care of all a person's needs, usually before he asks, and he never has any fears for the future. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Baranovitch p. 217)

"For with my staff I crossed the Jordan . . ." (32:11)

Rashi cites a midrash stating that when Yaakov fled to Lavan's house, he struck the Jordan river with his staff and it split.

Why isn't that miracle mentioned expressly in the Torah the way the splitting of the Yam Suf is mentioned? Indeed, why are many miracles -- for example, Avraham's surviving the fiery furnace -- not mentioned in the Torah?

R' Chaim Friedlander z"l (Mashgiach of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak; died 1986) explains that there are two types of miracles: "hidden miracles" ("nissim nistarim") and "revealed miracles" ("nissim geluyim"). We are surrounded by hidden miracles, yet we don't recognize them, precisely because they happen so often and because they do not involve significant deviations from the laws of nature. Hidden miracles can remain hidden because their primary purpose is to save a deserving person from some trouble. In contrast, a revealed miracle occurs primarily in order to enhance a person's emunah / faith.

Miracles whose primary purpose is to aid a tzaddik do not need to be recorded for posterity; thus, Yaakov's splitting the Jordan and Avraham's salvation from the furnace are not expressly mentioned in the Torah. Only miracles whose purpose was to strengthen our emunah are recorded.

In this light, says R' Friedlander, we can understand why the gemara (Shabbat 21b) answers the question, "Why is there Chanukah?" by focusing on the miracle of the oil, not even mentioning the military victory over the Greeks, while the "Al Ha'nissim" prayer focuses on the battle and does not mention the miracle of the oil. The military victory was a hidden miracle. [It is not necessarily miraculous when the weaker nation wins, especially if the weaker nation is defending its own homeland.] Yet, the miracle of the military victory is the miracle for which we are thankful, not for the miracle of the oil, and therefore only the military victory is mentioned in our prayers.

On the other hand, the miracle victory alone would not have justified establishing a holiday; only a miracle with a long- lasting spiritual message could justify that. This is why the gemara's question, "Why is there Chanukah?" is answered by focusing on the miracle of the oil. The miracle of the oil shows us G-d's strength and strengthens our own faith, thus helping us realize that the military victory was miraculous as well. (Siftei Chaim: Moadim Vol. II, p.4)

[Editor's Note: The above analysis appears to classify Yaakov's splitting of the Jordan and Avraham's surviving the furnace as "hidden miracles." Perhaps this can be understood as follows:

Ramban defines a hidden miracle as one that does not involve a significant deviation from the laws of nature. Yet, the laws of nature are themselves only tools of Hashem. The greater one's recognition of this fact, the less "faith" one places in nature, and the greater the deviation from nature that is necessary to "surprise" a person. Of course, Avraham and Yaakov were thankful for their respective salvations, but perhaps it was no surprise to Avraham that he was saved from the furnace. Perhaps it did not come as a shock to Yaakov that he could split the Jordan with his staff. To these spiritual giants, these events were relatively hidden miracles.]

"Then Elokim said to him [Yaakov], 'Your name is Yaakov. Your name shall not always be called Yaakov, but Yisrael shall be your name.' Thus He called his name Yisrael." (35:10)

R' Elya Meir Bloch z"l (1894-1955; rosh yeshiva of Telshe in Cleveland) asks: What is the purpose of the introductory phrase, "Your name is Yaakov"? He explains:

Earlier in the parashah (32:29), the angel with whom Yaakov had fought told Yaakov that he would henceforth be called "Yisrael." Chazal say that that angel was none other than the "guardian angel" of Esav ("saro shel Esav").

By saying to Yaakov, "Your name is Yaakov," Hashem was telling the Patriarch, and teaching us as well: "Even though Esav's angel has renamed you Yisrael, you are still Yaakov until I change your name. Your special status in the world - represented by the name "Yisrael" - does not come from the recognition that Esav - representing the world's powers - gives you, but only from the recognition that I, Hashem, give you." (Peninei Da'at)

R' Simcha Bunim Sofer z"l

(The "Shevet Sofer")

R' Simcha Bunim Sofer was born in Pressburg, Hungary (now Bratislava, Slovakia) in 1843. He was the son of the "Ketav Sofer" (R' Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer) and the grandson of the "Chatam Sofer" (R' Moshe Sofer), and he followed his father and grandfather as head of the great yeshiva in Pressburg.

It was said that R' Sofer differed from his father in that the latter was distinguished by his careful, painstaking logic while the former was distinguished by his sharp mind. In this way, it was said, the younger R' Sofer was like his great-grandfather, R' Akiva Eiger. R' Sofer left behind 35 volumes of writings covering both halachic and aggadic topics. His son, R' Akiva Sofer, expressed wonder that his father had the time to compose these works while heading the Pressburg yeshiva and (unofficially) heading Hungarian Orthodox Jewry.

During R' Sofer's tenure, the Pressburg yeshiva continued to be the premier Torah institution in Hungary as it had been for two generations before. R' Sofer also continued his father's work in combating, both in the public arena and on a personal level, the inroads that the Reform movement was making in Hungary. It is told that R' Sofer once approached a Jewish banker and urged him to close his bank on Shabbat. The banker refused saying that he was not observant and did not believe in the practical mitzvot. "If you will not do it because of your fear of Heaven," said R' Sofer, "do it out of shame."

"Shame?" smiled the banker. "Why is it shameful not to be observant?"

R' Sofer answered him: "The Sages say that if one has no shame, we may be certain that his

ancestors were not present at the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. How can we be certain? The Torah records that all of the Jews answered as one, 'Na'aseh ve'nishmah' / 'We will do and we will listen.' Don't you think that among the millions of Jews there must have been at least a few who did not want to receive the Torah? Why then did the Jews answer 'as one'? Because those who did not want to observe the mitzvot were ashamed to stand out. Had they not had this shame, they would simply have walked away from Har Sinai."

R' Sofer died on 15 Kislev 5667 (1906). (Sources: Gedolei Ha'dorot p. 889; Otzar Ha'rabbanim)

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