

HOW FREE IS YOUR WILL?

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Today's Learning:

Bava Batra 2:11-12

Orach Chaim 548:10-12

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Bava Metzia 9

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Kilayim 21

The beginning of this week's parashah describes the reunion of Yaakov and Esav after decades of separation. As the parashah unfolds, we see Esav as the fierce warrior and Yaakov as the pious father of the Jewish people.

Seemingly, writes R' Elazar M. Shach z"l (see biography below), Yaakov and Esav are merely fulfilling the destinies that were assigned to them from birth and childhood: Esav, the ruddy hunter, and Yaakov, the wholesome dweller in the tents of Torah. But if we think this, says R' Shach, we are in error, for what distinguishes mankind from all of the higher and lower creatures - the angels and the animals - if not man's free will! Surely Yaakov could have chosen to be Esav and Esav could have chosen to be Yaakov.

R' Shach elaborates: The gemara states that one may not testify that a man died merely because the witness saw the man being thrown to lions. After all, says the gemara, lions sometimes attack and

eat and sometimes do not. Does this mean that lions have free will? asks R' Shach. No, they do not! The reason that lions sometimes attack and eat and sometimes do not is because they are "programmed" to eat only when they are hungry. When they are not hungry, they don't attack.

But isn't this true of man, as well? Doesn't man, too, sin only because he feels a need to? Furthermore, if man had the clear understanding of G-d that angels have, wouldn't man, like the angels, never sin? Perhaps angels do have free will, but they just have no incentive to sin because they have an absolute understanding of right and wrong!

The answer to all of these questions is that man's free will is unique. Our Sages teach, "Everything is in G-d's hands except man's fear of G-d." Do we need to be told that fear of G-d is not controlled by G-d? It would be worthless if it were so. The lesson of this gemara, explains R' Shach is that despite the knowledge of right and wrong and the inborn traits and predilections that G-d gave man, man still has absolute free will. Man has complete control over his actions, complete free will, and he can never give as an excuse the fact that he was born with a tendency to act a certain way. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Avi Ezri p. 102)

"These people are sh'laimim with us; let them settle in the land and trade in it, for see, the land is wide open before them!" (34:21)

These words were uttered by Chamor the son of Shechem in his effort to convince the people of his city (also called Shechem) to accept the demands made by Yaakov's sons. Accepting those demands was a pre-condition to Chamor's marrying Yaakov's daughter Dinah.

R' Yitzchak of Volozhin z"l (1780-1849) interprets Chamor's words as follows: These people, the sons of Yaakov, will make us "sh'laimim" / "whole." Every nation lacks some resources, which must be imported from elsewhere, and has an excess of other resources, which can be exported. Therefore, every nation needs a merchant class. Chamor argued that the sons of Yaakov were fit to be that merchant class and would make the city of Shechem shalaim, whole, for the land around Shechem was "wide open," having many items to be exported. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Rashei Yeshivat Volozhin p. 295)

R' Yitzchak's son-in-law, R' Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin z"l (1817-1892) added: This is why the Jewish people are referred to (in Shir Hashirim 7:1) as the "Shulamit," from the root "shalaim." Throughout history, the Jews have been those who settled in countries and served as merchants or in other positions that the host countries required. (Ibid.)

"Two of Yaakov's sons, Shimon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each took his sword and they came upon the city confidently..." (34:25)

Rashi comments that Shimon and Levi are called "Dinah's brothers" because they risked their lives for her. R' Meir Zvi Bergman shlita (see the biography section) explains:

It is natural for a person to risk his life to save himself, and a brother's nature is to feel the same way about his kin. This is what Aharon meant when he pleaded with Moshe, when Miriam suffered from tzara'at (Bemidbar 12:12), "Let her not be like a corpse, like one who leaves his mother's womb with half of his flesh having been consumed!" As Rashi explains, Aharon argued that if Miriam continued to suffer, half of Moshe's flesh would be consumed because he was her brother.

Rambam explains the obligation to give charity as arising from the fact that we are all G-d's children. This means that we are all brothers, and, "If one brother will not have mercy on another brother, who will have mercy on him?" This is the meaning of the obligation to "Love your fellow as yourself," adds R' Bergman. Train yourself to feel that we are all G-d's children, and it will come naturally to treat others like your brothers. (Sha'arei Orah, Vol. I)

"Yaakov set up a monument over her grave; it is the monument of Rachel's grave until today." (35:20)

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Ta'anit Ch.2) records: "Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel says, 'We do not make nefashot / monuments for tzaddikim; their words are their monuments'." How would Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel explain Yaakov's action in building a monument for Rachel?

R' Shimon Efrati z"l (rabbi in Serbia before World War II; post-war rabbi of Warsaw) explains: The midrash, commenting on our verse, cites the above opinion of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel and then states: "From here we learn that all of Israel is named after Rachel, as it is written (Yirmiyah 31:19), 'Is Ephraim [grandson of Rachel] My most precious son or a delightful child?' [The midrash continues:] Why did Yaakov bury Rachel on the side of the road? Because Yaakov saw prophetically that the exiles were destined to pass by there, and he buried her there so that she would plead for mercy for them, as it is written (Yirmiyah 31:14-15), 'So said Hashem: A voice was heard on high -- wailing, bitter weeping -- Rachel weeps for her children, she refuses to be consoled for her children, for they are gone. So said Hashem: Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your accomplishment -- the words of Hashem -- and they shall return from the enemy's land'."

This midrash was bothered by the same question that we asked, writes R' Efrati. The midrash appears to be answering that Yaakov placed a monument over Rachel's grave so that the Jewish people would know to pray there when they passed-by thousands of years later on their way into exile. But what does the midrash mean when it says, "All of Israel is named after Rachel"? Also, why do the Sages call a structure over a grave, a "nefesh" (literally, "soul")?

R' Efrati explains: R' Avraham Binyamin Shmuel Sofer z"l (the "Ketav Sofer"; 1815-1871) writes that a monument over a grave has two purposes: it is a reminder to the living to pray for the nefesh / soul

of the deceased - hence the word "nefesh" is used to describe the monument itself - and it identifies a place where the living can pray for their own welfare. When Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel stated that one does not build a nefesh over the grave of a tzaddik, he was referring only to the first purpose, the one which gives the nefesh its name. Tzaddikim do not need monuments to be built for them to remind us to pray for them, for their words, i.e., their teachings, are their monuments. However, when Yaakov built the monument over Rachel's grave, he had the second purpose in mind, i.e., that we have a place to pray for our own welfare. [The statement, "All of Israel is named after Rachel," apparently indicates that all Jews, no matter which wife of Yaakov they descend from, can gain by praying at Rachel's grave.] (She'eilot U'teshuvot Meegai Ha'harigah p. 61)

R' Elazar Menachem Man Shach z"l

This week marks thirty days since the passing of R' Elazar Menachem Man Shach z"l. R' Shach's name was known throughout the world, and his death was even reported in major American newspapers. Yet, while R' Shach was known to the non-Jewish world, and even much of Jewish world, primarily as a leader who influenced Israeli politics and policies in profound ways, he was first and foremost a rosh yeshiva, a Torah scholar, and a profound lover of all Jews, whether or not they shared his own outlook on life.

R' Shach was born on 29 Tevet 5654 / January 7, 1894, in Vaboilnick in northern Lithuania, the fourth child of Ezriel and Batsheva Shach. (R' Shach's birth year is taken from his Lithuanian passport, but some sources put his age at 103. His birthday, 29 Tevet, was reported by R' Shach himself, who noted that he was inspired by the fact that his birthday was the yahrzeit of the sage, R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin.)

At a young age, the future R' Shach traveled away from home to join the yeshiva in the town of Ponovezh. Shortly after his bar mitzvah, he transferred to Yeshiva Knesset Yisrael in Slobodka, where he attracted the attention of one of the senior students, R' Isser Zalman Meltzer z"l (1870-1954). R' Shach became a close disciple of R' Meltzer, and, in 1924, married R' Meltzer's niece, Guttel. (Rebbetzin Guttel Shach died in 1969.) Throughout his Slobodka days, R' Shach lived in great poverty, having only one suit of clothing. On Thursdays, when he washed his solitary shirt for Shabbat, he was forced to remain shirtless in the cold until it dried.

R' Shach related that when he was a young teenager in Slobodka, the well-known communal activist R' Yaakov Lipschutz (formerly the secretary to R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor) used to take him for daily walks and discuss current events with him. The Chafetz Chaim, too, used to discuss communal matters and current events with the young scholar. R' Shach later recalled that he wondered at the time why these older sages bothered to discuss such things with a young student. In hindsight, however, it appears that both R' Lipschutz and the Chafetz Chaim foresaw that this young student was destined to be looked to by multitudes to provide the Torah's viewpoint regarding current

events.

During World War I, R' Shach suffered terribly as a refugee. Following the war, he traveled to Slutsk to continue his studies under R' Meltzer (who was then rabbi and rosh yeshiva in that town). When the Russian civil war reached Slutsk, R' Shach and his teacher were arrested and imprisoned. Upon their release, they moved to Kletsk, Poland, where R' Meltzer's son-in-law, R' Aharon Kotler, had a yeshiva. R' Shach served as a rosh yeshiva in R' Kotler's yeshiva, and later in the yeshiva in Luninetz. (R' Kotler later headed the famed yeshiva in Lakewood, New Jersey.)

In late 1939, R' Simon Shkop, one of the senior roshei yeshiva in Lithuania, passed away. R' Shach was one of the two leading candidates to succeed R' Shkop; it was even said that R' Shach's style of learning was very similar to R' Shkop's. In the end, however, it was decided that R' Shach, then in his early 40's, was too young. Shortly thereafter, R' Shach set out for Eretz Yisrael, where he headed several small yeshivot until 1946. In that year, he joined the faculty of the Ponovezh Yeshiva, where he remained for the rest of his life. During his first two decades in Eretz Yisrael, R' Shach also enjoyed a very close relationship with R' Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik, the "Brisker Rav."

There is not enough space here to describe the countless Torah and chessed projects in which R' Shach was involved during the second half-century of his life. Innumerable people - Torah giants, yeshiva deans and teachers, politicians, struggling ba'alei teshuvah, and "everyday" folk - passed through R' Shach's study to seek his advice about matters of national and personal significance, or to ask for his blessing.

R' Shach passed away on Friday morning, 16 Cheshvan / November 2. His funeral, held a few hours later was attended by approximately 600,000 people, and was broadcast live in many places in the diaspora. R' Shach is survived by two children: Devorah, the wife of R' Meir Zvi Bergman, a rosh yeshiva in Bnei Brak, and Dr. Ephraim, an official of the Israeli Education Ministry. (R' Shach's first daughter, Miriam Raisel, died in 1939, at age 14. It is reported that R' Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, at that time the leading halachic authority in Lithuania, baby-sat for little Ephraim Shach during his sister's funeral.) R' Shach also left a number of written works: Avi Ezri on Rambam's Mishneh Torah; a Pesach Haggadah; Rosh Amanah, a collection of insights on chumash; and Michtavim U'ma'amarim and B'zot Ani Botaiach, collections of letters and speeches. Among the recurring themes in R' Shach's letters and speeches are a Jew's obligation to see G-d's hand in current events, his duty to remember that we are still in a state of galut / exile, even in the State of Israel, and the need to strengthen Torah study in times of national crisis. (This biography was based on several obituaries and other articles.)

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