

ACHIEVING BALANCE

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Vayishlach

Achieving Balance

Volume 21, No. 8
18 Kislev 5767
December 9, 2006

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Today's Learning:
Nedarim 2:3-4
O.C. 686:1-3
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Rosh Hashanah 4
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Shabbat 37

As this week's parashah opens, Yaakov is preparing to encounter Esav for the first time in 36 years. Ramban writes: "This parashah was written to inform us that Hashem saved His servant and redeemed him from one who was stronger than he. It also teaches that Yaakov did not rely on his righteousness in order to be saved; rather, he took whatever practical steps were within his ability to take. It further hints to us that what happened to Yaakov vis-a-vis Esav was a portent of what would happen to us vis-a-vis Esav's descendants. Therefore, we must follow in the footsteps of the tzaddik [Yaakov] and prepare ourselves with the same three tools that Yaakov prepared -- prayer, gifts and war." At the same time, Ramban notes, our Sages criticized Yaakov for making the initial contact with Esav and awakening a sleeping dog. [See page 2.] This, too, was a portent for Yaakov's descendants who, in the time of the Second Temple, sought an alliance with Esav's descendant Rome, thus allowing that empire to gain a foothold in the Holy Land. (According to Sefer Chashmonaim, it was Yehuda, son of Mattityahu, who first forged this alliance.)

Achieving balance between bitachon / trust in Hashem and hishtadlut / human efforts is a major theme in this parashah. Writing to Israeli soldiers 33 years ago this week, R' Kalman Kahana z"l (1910-1991; one of the leading halachic authorities and thinkers of the religious kibbutz movement) addressed the depression that some people -- even Orthodox Jews -- felt after Israel's near defeat in the early days of the Yom Kippur War. Such depression, he wrote, came from the feeling that (in the words of Devarim 8:17): "My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth!" On the other hand, bitachon means knowing that the success or failure of our efforts is determined by Hashem for reasons that only He knows. With this understanding, writes R' Kahana, we can hope to fulfill another portent in this week's parashah (33:18), "Yaakov arrived intact at the city of Shechem." Rashi explains: Intact in body because he was cured of his lameness and with his Torah knowledge intact as well. (Terumat Kohen p.140)

"Then Yaakov sent angels ahead of him to Esav, his brother, to the land of Seir, the field of Edom."
(Bereishit 32:4)

The midrash says, quoting Mishlei (26:17): "Like one who seizes a dog's ears, so is one who grows wrathful over a dispute that is not his." [Says the midrash:] Hashem said to Yaakov, "Esav was traveling along, minding his own business, and you had to send him a message?!"

R' Zvi Hirsch Kalischer z"l (1795-1874; German rabbi) asks: Does it not display good midot / character traits that Yaakov humbled himself before another person for the sake of ensuring peace? Why should he be criticized for this behavior?

He answers: Many commentaries have questioned whether Yaakov's fear of Esav manifested a shortcoming in bitachon / trust in Hashem. In fact, it was appropriate for Yaakov to fear that he would be unworthy of G-d's protection because he might have sinned. However, that feeling should have been a private matter between himself and Hashem. To display it publicly was wrong because it could cause others to question Yaakov's bitachon. (In this respect, he acted unlike his grandfather Avraham who was not afraid to attack four powerful kings with a small army.) Had Yaakov ignored Esav, Esav would have assumed that Yaakov was confident of a miraculous victory, and Esav would have avoided Yaakov as well.

(Sefer Ha'berit)

"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 (a rosh yeshiva in Bnei Brak) 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)

From the Haftarah . . .

"Though you ascend as high as an eagle (nesher) and place your nest among the stars -- from there I will bring you down! -- the words of Hashem." (Ovadia 1:4)

R' Yosef Chaim z"l (Baghdad; died 1909) writes: Esav's haughtiness, which is the subject of this verse, was fed by the gift of 550 animals that Yaakov sent him in our parashah. This number is precisely the gematria of 'nesher' (eagle); thus, Esav ascended as high as an eagle.

What is meant by Esav's placing his nest among the stars? This refers to any merit he may possess as a result of being the son of Yitzchak and Rivka. (See Daniel 12:3, where tzaddikim are referred to as stars.) Do not be haughty! Hashem declares. "From there I will bring you down!" Specifically because Esav lived among tzaddikim and did not learn from them he deserves to be punished. Indeed, the Gemara (Sanhedrin 15b) explains that this is why the downfall of Esav was predicted by the prophet Ovadia. Ovadia was a convert, a descendant of Esav, who served as a courtier to the wicked King Achav and Queen Izevel. G-d says, "Let the tzaddik [Ovadia] who lived among two wicked people and did not learn from their ways prophesy regarding the rasha who lived among two tzaddikim and did not learn from their ways."

(Birkat Chaim)

"Then saviors will ascend Mount Zion to judge Esav's mountain, and the kingdom will be Hashem's." (Ovadia 1:21)

R' Yehuda Loewe z"l (the Maharal of Prague; died 1609) observes that we customarily append this verse to the daily recitation of Az Yashir. Why?

He explains: [Az Yashir concludes, "Hashem shall reign for all eternity." However,] just as there cannot be a king without a nation, so a king's sovereignty is necessarily diminished if he has

opponents. A true king is one who can judge his enemies and save his subjects. [Therefore, after affirming that Hashem is king, we express our confidence that He will one day exert the authority that will make His sovereignty complete.]

(Gevurot Hashem Ch.47)

Diaries

R' Yaakov Emden (1697-1776) is well-known for his notes on the Talmud, his halachic writings, and his siddur commentary. One of his lesser known works is his autobiography, Megilat Sefer, part of which is devoted to stories about his father, the noted halachic authority, and rabbi of Hamburg, Amsterdam and Lemberg, R' Zvi Ashkenazi (the "Chacham Zvi"; died 1718). In this excerpt, R' Emden describes the circumstances that led to his father's portrait being painted - an unusual occurrence for an early 18th century rabbi. The episode begins immediately after the Chacham Zvi's resignation as rabbi of Amsterdam (because of power struggles among the lay leadership there).

When [the people of London, England] heard what had happened to him in Amsterdam and that he had agreed to leave there and to seek his destiny elsewhere, they developed a burning desire to see him and to behold the face of the Shechinah [a reference to the mitzvah of honoring a Torah scholar, which is a corollary of the mitzvah to honor G-d]. They pleaded with him to come to them before setting out for [his native] Poland. He, of blessed memory, acceded to their request and traveled to London alone [i.e., without his family] for a few days. He was treated almost like royalty there. The heads of the Sephardic community came out to meet him in boats together with the Jewish masses from one end of London to the other. [Ed. note: R' Ashkenazi was, as his name suggests, Ashkenazic. However, much of his rabbinic career was spent in Sephardic communities such as Serbia and Amsterdam, thus leading to an affinity for Sephardim and his being known by the Sephardic title "Chacham."] Seeing the commotion, the [non-Jewish] neighbors asked: "What is happening? Has your messiah come?"

Before [the Chacham Zvi] left London, the leaders of the Sephardic community, in their great love for him, asked him to leave behind an image of himself. However, he rebuffed their request, considering it to be highly unusual. Eventually they attained their desire when someone engaged [the Chacham Zvi] in an extended conversation while a portrait painter worked secretly in the next room. The picture was wondrous in the eyes of those who knew him. When I [R' Yaakov Emden] first saw it on my visit to London, I was taken aback, as if my father was standing before me. Copies were made of the picture and sold for a high price, and they can still be found on the market in London [when these words were written about 50 years later].

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