

IN G-D WE TRUST – BUT HOW MUCH?

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Parshas Vayishlach

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Our parashah opens with Yaakov preparing to meet Esav after a 20-year absence from Eretz Yisrael. We read (32:8), "Yaakov became very frightened, and it distressed him, so he divided the people with him, and the cattle, herds, and camels, into two camps."

Many Rishonim/early commentaries are troubled by Yaakov's apparent lack of bitachon/trust in Hashem. Rashi z"l (to verse 10) explains that Yaakov was afraid that he might have committed sins which made him unworthy of G-d's protection. R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (Rambam; 1135-1204) writes, on the other hand, that Yaakov's lack of bitachon was, in fact, a flaw. (Shemoneh Perakim ch.7)

The latter's son, Rabbeinu Avraham ben Ha'Rambam z"l (Egypt; 1186-1237), suggests a different approach. He writes: The highest of the three types of bitachon involves doing without all forms of normal human endeavor, relying instead on miracles that are contrary to nature. Such bitachon is very rare, and even those who achieve it cannot expect to maintain it constantly. There is no question, Rabbeinu Avraham writes, that Yaakov Avinu attained this level sometimes; otherwise, how could he have left his wealthy father's home with nothing more than a walking stick (see verse 11) and how could he have gone to sleep with a rock for a pillow (see 28:11)?! Nevertheless, unless a person is experiencing ruach ha'kodesh/Divine inspiration at that particular moment, or if G-d has made a specific promise to a person, one cannot be expected to maintain such extreme bitachon that he would not make some efforts to protect himself and his family. (Ha'maspik L'ovdei Hashem)

"I have been diminished by all the kindnesses and by all the truth that You have done with Your servant; for with my staff I crossed this Jordan [River] and now I have become two camps." (32:11)

Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pekudah z"l (Spain; early 11th century) explains why tzaddikim are so fearful of

benefitting from G-d's kindness. First, the more that one receives from Hashem, the more one is obligated to "give back" in the form of higher and higher levels of Divine service. The righteous fear that they will be unable to live up to this demand and that they will become deserving of punishment, such that what started as a gift to them will turn out to be the opposite.

In addition, we are taught that the primary reward for mitzvot is in the World-to-Come. However, this applies only to the righteous. Regarding the wicked it says (Devarim 7:10), "He repays His enemies in his (the enemy's) lifetime to make him perish." In their humility, tzaddikim are afraid that they are in the category of the wicked, not the righteous, and any kindness that they receive in this world is actually their eternal reward. (Chovot Ha'levavot: Sha'ar Avodat Ha'Elokim ch.6)

"Rescue me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav, for I fear him lest he come and strike me down, mother and children." (32:12)

R' Shlomo Alkabetz z"l (1505-1584; author of the Friday night hymn Lecha Dodi, among other works) writes that Yaakov referred in this verse not (only) to Esav, but to Esav's descendant, Haman who planned "to exterminate all Jews, young and old, children and women" (Esther 3:13). Thus, immediately after Yaakov's prayer (32:14), the Torah says, "He spent the night there." Note that the final letters of the (Hebrew) words in this phrase spell "Haman." Also, the word "night" appears three times in our chapter, alluding to the three days and nights of the fast that Mordechai and Esther decreed. (Manot Ha'levi to Esther 7:7)

"Yaakov was left l'vado/alone . . ." (32:25)

The Midrash Rabbah states that this verse equates Yaakov's "aloneness" with Hashem's "aloneness." About Yaakov it says, "Yaakov was left l'vado/alone," and about G-d it says, "Hashem l'vado/alone will be exalted on that day."

What is this midrash teaching?

R' Itamar Schwartz shlita (Yerushalayim) explains: G-d implanted the feeling of loneliness in man for a reason. Specifically, man feels lonely so that he will search for G-d and make Him his "companion." G-d, too, is "lonely" in the sense that He is waiting for man to search for him.

R' Schwartz adds: Most people who feel lonely try to mitigate this feeling by surrounding themselves with friends. One who automatically reacts in this way, without thinking about the reason that loneliness was created, is missing the point and overlooking a gift that G-d has given him. (B'lvavi Mishkan Evneh II p.99)

"Therefore Bnei Yisrael are not to eat the gid ha'nasheh / displaced sinew on the hip-socket to this day, because he struck Yaakov's hip-socket on the displaced sinew." (32:33)

R' David ben Shmuel Hakochavi z"l (Spain and Provence; died approx. 1330) writes: Our Sages say (Chullin 100b) that this verse was actually taught at Sinai, but it was written in context. [In other words, we do not observe the prohibition of eating an animal's gid ha'nasheh because it originated with Yaakov's sons, but rather because G-d commanded us in the Torah to observe such a prohibition.] This law teaches us two lessons:

(1) That we should distance ourselves from those things from which our forefathers distanced themselves.

(2) That we should use the occasion of eating to recall what befell our forefather Yaakov. (Migdal David: Azhara 183)

"It happened, while Yisrael dwelt in that land, that Reuven went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine, and Yisrael heard; and the sons of Yaakov were twelve." (35:22)

The Gemara (Shabbat 55b) states: Whoever says that Reuven sinned [by committing adultery] is mistaken, for our verse confirms that Reuven remained in good standing after this event ("and the sons of Yaakov were twelve"). Rather, as Rashi z"l comments on our verse, after Rachel's death, Yaakov moved to Bilhah's tent. Reuven protested against this perceived slight to his mother, Leah, and he moved Yaakov's bed.

If that is all Reuven did, why does the Torah describe it in such strong language? R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) explains:

The Torah describes events in terms that reflect the impact that they have, or are meant to have, on us. Had the Torah merely written that Reuven moved Yaakov's bed, we would not have seen it as a significant event. In fact, this slight disturbance of the harmony of Yaakov's home diminished in some small way Yaakov's ability to transmit his legacy to his children, and the resulting effect on our spirituality, as Yaakov's descendants, is magnified many times over--as if someone had actually sullied his soul by committing adultery. [Ed. note: An analogy might be the way that a small decrease in the amount of money one places in a good investment compounds dramatically over time.]

Even so, why would the Torah allow us to have such a negative impression of Reuven? This, answers R' Kook, highlights another point: We are never meant to understand the Torah based on the written word alone. Only through the Written Torah and the Oral Torah combined can we ever have a true understanding of what G-d is telling us. (Ein Ayah: Shabbat ch.5 no.44)

Letters from Our Sages

We read in our parashah that one of the steps that Yaakov Avinu took to prepare for meeting, and being saved from, Esav was to pray. Below we present a letter from R' Zvi Pesach Frank z"l (1873-1960; Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim) relating to one aspect of prayer. The letter is printed in Shevivei Or, p. 177.

I have seen a breach in the wall surrounding the "vineyard of Israel," such that many people who are held by the general public to be wholesome and G-d-fearing regularly sit and engage in mundane conversations during the shliach tzibbur's repetition of shemoneh esrei. In so doing, they transgress the explicit ruling of the Shulchan Aruch (siman 124) that one should not engage in mundane conversations when the shliach tzibbur is repeating shemoneh esrei, and if one does, says the Shulchan Aruch, he is a sinner whose sin is too great to bear. It is appropriate to rebuke such a person. Also, one should teach his children to respond, "Amen," for as soon as a young child says, "Amen," he earns a share in the World-to-Come.

[R' Frank continues:] In recent times, many, many people, including many bnei Torah, engage in mundane conversations during the repetition of shemoneh esrei, and one sin leads to another such that they neglect answering "Amen" and "Yehei shmei rabbah." The holy Zohar says that such people are among those whose punishment is very severe. See also [the halachic work] Pri Megadim, which quotes the [work] Eliyahu Rabbah, which cites the [14th century work] Kol Bo, which says, "Woe to those who speak during the prayers, for we have seen several synagogues destroyed for this sin." In the [work] Vavei Ha'amudim it says that people should be appointed to discourage such behavior and offenders should be shamed publicly.

But, now, the famed sage R' Ephraim Zalman Heilprin (shlita) [z"l (1871-1961; rabbi in Galicia; Denver, Colorado; and Yerushalayim)] has become inspired regarding this matter to found a society of wholesome and G-d-fearing people who will supervise during the prayers, will be careful themselves, and will warn those who are not accustomed to be careful regarding this great matter, such that [speaking] has become permitted in their eyes. Every G-d-fearing person should give his aid to this mitzvah which is as lofty as the Heavens, may they be among those who bring merit to the public, and may we merit the full redemption in the near future. Such is the prayer of one who signs on behalf of the mitzvah--[Rabbi] Zvi Pesach Frank.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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