

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

This week's Torah portion continues the narrative of the flight of Yaakov (Jacob) from the wrath of his brother Esav (Esau). After his dream of the ladder, he completes his journey to his mother's homeland, where he will spend the next 20 years working for a livelihood, marrying and having twelve of his thirteen children. Upon his arrival, he meets Rachel, the woman he knew he was destined to marry, and "he raised up his voice and cried (Beraishis/Genesis 29:11)." Rashi explains he was upset that he was forced to come without gifts, in contrast to Eliezer, his grandfather's emissary, who came to this land to find his mother for his father laden with golden bracelets and rings. Yaakov had departed with the appropriate presents, but had to part with them in the middle of his journey. Esav had sent Elifaz, his son, to murder Yaakov, but Elifaz was a disciple of his grandfather Yitzchak (Isaac), not his father. Nevertheless, he chased after and caught up to Yaakov and asked his uncle if there was any way he could follow his father's command to kill him. Yaakov remembered the maxim that one bereft of any possessions is considered a dead man, so he told Elifaz to take all of his worldly possessions.

Riva (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Asher; died c.1130; student of Rashi; one of the early Tosafists, a group of French and German Rabbis of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries whose commentary on the Babylonian Talmud appears alongside the text of the Gemara) is perplexed by the entire sequence. The Torah limits its command to honor one's father and mother to situations which do not run afoul of Torah law. But Esav's order was to murder Yaakov, an act forbidden by the same Ten Commandments, thus Elifaz had no obligation whatsoever to heed his father. Why did he continue to look for a way to fulfill his father's wishes? Riva answers that Elifaz wished to find a way that fulfilled Esav's command without violating the Torah.

How did Riva answer his question? Ultimately, Esav's words were NOT fulfilled, so Elifaz really did not accomplish anything. With Esav's command not fulfilled, the question returns: why did Elifaz expend the time and effort to comply with his father's request when he had no obligation to do so? Furthermore, why did Yaakov assist Elifaz's pursuit? He knew that Elifaz's charge was impossible and not binding. Yet he gave away the jewelry he had brought to give to his future bride to his nephew, a situation that pained him so that he was brought to tears. We know that Yaakov was very thrifty. Twenty years later, during his return to Canaan, he got into a battle with Esav's guardian angel after he went back across the Yabok Stream to fetch some small vessels he had left behind and would not abandon, even though by that time he had amassed great wealth (Beraishis 32:25; Rashi *ibid.*).

How could he forsake all of this jewelry?

Rabbi Alter Hanoach Leibowitz (Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim in Forest Hills, Queens, New York) draws the answer from a concept found in the Talmud in Tractate Gittin (81a). The Talmud contrasts the piety of the "earlier generations" to that of the "later generations". The earlier generations, the Talmud elucidates, were meticulous about bringing in their produce from the fields to the manor house through the front gate. Transporting the produce on this path, through the normal point of entry, created an obligation to tithe the products of the gifts for the Kohanim (the priests), the Leviim (their assistants), and the poor. The later generations would bring in the produce through adjacent storage yards or rooftop points of entry. These entries, not intended to be used for this function, did not generate an obligation to tithe. Both generations followed the letter of the law, but it was the earlier generation who saw the mitzvah opportunity, and chose not to utilize the legal loophole.

Elifaz and Yaakov, declares Rabbi Leibowitz, personify this value to an even greater degree. Elifaz knew that he did not, and could not, have any obligation to respect his father's wishes. He could not even imagine that there was any way to obey. Nevertheless, maybe - some way, somehow - someone could formulate a plan that complied partially. So great was Elifaz's desire to fulfill the divine command to honor his father, if there could be any semblance of conforming to Esav's order, it would be worth all of the effort. Yaakov identified with Elifaz's passion and concurred that any measure Elifaz could take should be taken; thus, he innovatively found a solution and fully facilitated its achievement.

How do we view our mitzvah opportunities? Are they an occasion to fortify our relationship with the Master of the Universe, to strengthen our "G-d consciousness", to sanctify even our most mundane acts? Or are they a hindrance, an obstacle we go to great lengths to circumvent? Elifaz traveled a considerable distance on the hope that he might be able to find a solution to an impossible situation. Are we willing to go that extra mile?

Have a good Shabbos!

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