

PERMANENT ASSETS

by Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden

The Tur (1) writes that the mitzvah (Divine command) to dwell in Succah booths derives from our forefather Yaakov (Jacob), whom the Torah says "built himself a house, and for his livestock he made succos (shelters)." (Beraishis/Genesis 33:17). What connection is there between the current festival and the huts Yaakov made for his animals?

Our Sages teach us that prior to Yaakov's struggle with the angel (ibid 32:25-33) he found himself alone, away from his family, retracing his steps to retrieve some small jars he left behind. It was then that the angel - Esau's guardian angel, Satan himself - wrestled with him. What is the connection between going back to retrieve the small jars and meeting this heavenly being?

"Yaakov remained alone for the sake of small jars: from here one sees that to the righteous, their possessions are dearer to them than their body, for they do not stretch out their hand to theft." (Talmud Chulin 91a) Rabbi Matsiyahu Salomon (2) explains the central focus of a righteous person is his service of G-d. Thus, he spends only requisite time to make a living to provide his family with the necessities and, of course, he does not earn his livelihood dishonestly. Every penny he has is hard earned and he knows that it is a Divine gift. He understands that every possession he owns is meant to facilitate his service to G-d. With this perspective, his possessions are very dear to him.

Tanna Devei Eliyahu expounds that the difference between Yaakov and Esav (Esau) was that Yaakov, even from the womb, wanted Olam Haba, the exclusively spiritual World to Come, whereas Esav pursued the pleasures of the physical world. The entire confrontation between Yaakov and Esav's angel is rooted in this concept. When Esav's guardian angel saw Yaakov retracing his steps to retrieve the jars, he thought that perhaps Yaakov was excessively invested in his possessions. He would then be able to overpower and destroy Yaakov, for Yaakov was "stealing" from Esav's portion. When the angel saw that Yaakov intended to retrieve only what he needed to help get to Olam Haba, the angel struck the socket of Yaakov's thigh, representative of his offspring. The angel could not overpower Yaakov but he could strike against his future generations.

To safeguard his future generations, Yaakov immediately taught his progeny to avoid Esav's pursuit of physical pleasures - and G-d gave us the festival of Succos to reinforce the lesson annually. He "built himself a house, and for his livestock he made shelters." He built himself a permanent structure as a place to study Torah, but temporary shelters for his possessions, to emphasize to all of us that our only true permanent possession is our G-d connectedness that we take with us to our spiritual eternity. Our material possessions of this world are simply a means toward that higher goal.

Have a Good Shabbos and Good Yom Tov!

(1) Rabbi Yaakov, son of the Rosh; c 1275 - c 1340; author of the Arba Turim, the halachic (Jewish legal) opus that restructured the legal rulings of the Talmud, reorganizing them topically, creating a superstructure that remains the standard for halachic works

(2) Mashgiach Ruchni/Spiritual Mentor of Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood, New Jersey

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