

YAAKOV'S MIXED MESSAGES

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Yaakov's Mixed Messages¹

How are we to imagine the tone of Yaakov's voice in the message he sent his brother? "With Lavan I dwelled/ *garti*..." Rashi offers us two understandings of Yaakov's intent.

The word *garti* may convey the impermanence of its root, *ger*. Yaakov would be relating that Esav needn't rue the loss of their father's *berachah*. It did not translate into the kind of success that Esav was interested in. Yaakov remained a *ger*, a wanderer and stranger who had not succeed in putting down roots. Yaakov's mood would then be muted, subdued and restrained.

Alternatively, *garti* may be taken as an anagram for *taryag*, or the 613 commandments of the Torah. Yaakov's message would then be one of confidence and triumph: I am not one to trifle with. I spiritually held my own against all odds, surviving with my *ruchniyus* intact in the house of Lavan. I survived him; I will survive you.

These are not variations on a theme. They seem to be mutually exclusive, to tell two different stories.

If we examine this episode for its *avodah*-instruction to us, we realize that it is all about our own battle with our *yetzer hora*. The struggle is never easy - but it at least seems possible to withstand the wiles of the *yetzer hora* when it conducts a conventional campaign, tempting us with all sorts of desires and lusts. When the *yetzer hora* comes after us in two completely different forms and guises, we might easily despair of holding our own. We might think of fighting a battle on one front, but find ourselves crushed by the prospect of a multi-frontal assault.

Yaakov alludes to such an assault. "Save me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav." Yaakov speaks of a two-pronged battle. Esav here represents pure, unvarnished *yetzer hora*, urging a person to taste all sorts of forbidden pleasures. The temptation can be strong - but we have proven strategy of meeting evil with good. We can help ourselves accomplish *sur me-ra*, turning back from evil, through *asei tov*, increasing our involvement with good. The poison of the *yetzer hora* has an antidote in Torah. Every mitzvah that we perform further weakens the power the *yetzer hora* holds over us.

To offset this, however, the *yetzer hora* embraces a very different strategy, coming to us not as Esav, but as a "brother." It offers no resistance to our performance of mitzvos, preferring instead to "create

blemishes in the sacred."² It tries to lessen the effect of our *avodas Hashem* by cheapening it, by lacing our Torah and our service of Hashem with pride and ulterior motives. By thus perverting our Torah and mitzvos, they become the property of the *Sitra Achra*³. Their power to protect us from the more direct overtures of the *yetzer hora* is nullified in the process.

We can understand Yaakov's dividing his camp in two along these lines. In the struggle against the *yetzer hora* (as symbolized by Esav), some would expend much effort in deepening their humility and self-abnegation, in order to better resist the *yetzer hora's* attempt to contaminate their mitzvos with pride and ulterior motives. Others - a second camp - would assume the opposite stance. They would stand up to the *yetzer hora*, directly battling its seductive appeal to baser lusts and desires.

It is sometimes crucial to take the strong, determined posture against the *yetzer hora*. We find an allusion to this in the story of Yosef and Potiphar's wife, as explicated by the *Bais Avraham*. In her attempt to get Yosef to sin, his master's wife grabs on to his cloak, his *begeed*, a word which, Chazal teach, is related to *begidah*, treachery. Potiphar's wife seized Yosef's previous indiscretions: "Do you imagine yourself to be perfect? You are far from it! How much of a difference will it make if you commit one more sin?" The *yetzer hora* attempts to ensnare us with a false, counterproductive humility, telling us to think less of ourselves than we ought to. Yosef responds perfectly. "There is none greater in this house than myself." Yosef employs *gaavah de-kedusha*, a holy pride, elevating his heart in the service of Hashem to assert his worth. "What you would have me do is unworthy of someone as important as myself! I will not do it!"

Which of these two approaches - unbending strength, or self-effacing humility - is the more important? In truth, every person must employ both. This might seem strange. The two approaches would seem to draw on antipodal qualities that cannot coexist within the same personality.

While it might seem that way, it is important to know that this is not true in regard to spiritual quests. In all other regards, *ahavah* and *yirah*⁴ cannot reign at the same moment within the same person. When it comes to the service of Hashem, however, "*Anochi*" and "*Lo yih'yeh lechah*" were stated together⁵. In conventional pursuits, all things have their own goals and purposes, often making them incompatible with each other. In the pursuit of *ruchniyus*, however, the goal is always to get closer to Hashem. Here, *ahavah* and *yirah* do not annihilate each other, but serve as different means to the same end, an end which unites them rather than separates them. When a person meekly yields himself up entirely to Hashem, the *Sitra Achra* loses his power over him - and he is freed up to become the very opposite: strong, confident and direct in battling the *yetzer hora*.

This, then, is what Yaakov meant by the double entendre of *garti*. He definitely meant both, serially and sequentially. "I lived simply and discretely, like the impermanent *ger*. I did not become haughty and self-important." This humility made room for him to boast that he had remained true to the 613 mitzvos, that he was indeed a force to contend with." The contradiction is its own resolution.

Having come this far, we can also state that Yaakov's two camps may not refer to two different groups of Jews. Rather, we are required to divide our internal forces between these seemingly opposing strategies that in striving for spiritual advancement are not contradictory at all.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 216-218

² An allusion to the halacha that certain blemishes disqualify consecrated animals from being offered in the Temple.

³ Lit. the other side, i.e the cosmic force of evil

⁴ Love and fear: two different modes of serving G-d, that stem from two very different expressions of our personalities. The former is expansive, the latter limiting and restrictive. In the context of this piece, *ahavah* would lead to rising to the occasion with a new-found confidence, whereas *yirah* would lead to the restrained and muted response.

⁵ I.e. the first two of the Ten Commandments were uttered simultaneously according to Chazal. The first is an affirmative obligation (and therefore, like all affirmative obligations, a reflection of *ahavah*). The second sets in place a prohibition, a restriction. We summon up *yirah*, reverence for Hashem and fear of the consequences of disobedience, when we submit to their strictures.