

# GIVING IT ALL WE HAVE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

*After a long journey, Yaakov Avinu finally arrives in the town of Padan- Aram. There, he meets his future wife, Rachel. "And it was, when Yaakov saw Rachel... Yaakov came forward and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and watered the sheep of Lavan. Then Yaakov... raised his voice and wept (29:10-11)."*

Why did he weep? The Ba'alei Tosafos explain (see also Rashi):

He wept because he arrived with empty hands. He thought, "Eliezer, who was my grandfather's servant, came laden with riches, while I come here destitute." Now it is true that Yitzchak had given Yaakov money and gifts when he sent him to Charan. However, Eisav had sent his son Eliphaz to ambush Yaakov and kill him. Eliphaz pursued and caught Yaakov, but, having been brought up under the guidance of his grandfather Yitzchak, he could not bring himself to murder. Eliphaz asked Yaakov, "What should I do about fulfilling my father's instructions?" Yaakov answered that technically, he could comply with his father's wishes by taking away all of Yaakov's wealth, thus impoverishing him. The Sages (Nedarim 64b) teach that destitution is tantamount to death.

Rabbeinu Tam questions this: The halachah is that a son is exempt from obeying his father's command when it violates Torah law. If Eliphaz was exempt, why did he bother asking Yaakov how he could fulfil his father's command? Rabbeinu Elyakim offers the following answer: Although it is true that Eliphaz was in fact exempt from obeying his father, he still desired to find some way, albeit a technicality, to fulfil both the Torah law and the instructions of his father.

R' Henach Leibowitz in Mussar HaTorah/Majesty of Man (p.82-83) comments that from Eliphaz's actions, we can glean an appreciation of the remarkable level of value which should be given to performing a mitzvah. Eliphaz could easily have just walked away, fully justified in reasoning that he was in this case exempt from the mitzvah of honouring his father (Kibbud Av), since his father's wishes were in direct contradiction with Torah law. Yet he did not do so. Instead, he beseeched his uncle to devise a strategy which would enable him to fulfil the mitzvah of kibud av. Do we always go out of our way to try and perform a mitzvah, or do we readily except an exemption that comes our way? How great was his love of the mitzvah of honouring one's parents!

If we look even closer, he says, we find an even more astonishing point in this story. Eliphaz, after all, ends up a wealthy man. Yaakov Avinu, on the other hand, gave away all that he had to enable another person to fulfil a small, technical facet of a mitzvah - in spite of the fact that the original "mitzvah" entailed his murder. We must also bear in mind that this is the same Yaakov who

appreciated the worth of his G-d-given property. So greatly, in fact, that in next week's parshah we find he retraced his steps in order to recover some small jars, even though he was by then a wealthy man (Rashi to 32:25).

At first glance, one may be lead to conclude that Yaakov gave away his possessions in order to save his own life. Yet this is not the case. As we have seen, Eliphaz, having been infused with a love for morality by his grandfather Yitzchak, was unwilling to murder Yaakov. His taking of Yaakov's possessions was merely a technical loophole to enable him to preserve the wishes of his father, in some small way. How great was Yaakov's love for a mitzvah! It is almost unfathomable that a person should give away all that he has to help someone else perform a mitzvah! Perhaps we could suggest that it was precisely such a person as Yaakov who deserved a kallah such as Rachel, who also was ready to sacrifice everything she had in order that her sister not be put to shame.

The Midrash (quoted in Perek Shira) tells an amazing story:

When David HaMelech completed sefer Tehilim, he allowed himself a small measure of pride. "Ribbono-shel-olam," he said, "is there any of Your creations that offers more songs and praises than I?" At that moment, David came upon a frog. She said to him, "David, do not become arrogant, for I offer more songs and praises than you. Not only that - each song that I sing is adorned with three-thousand allegories. Furthermore, I perform a very great mitzvah. The mitzvah is as follows: On the shores of the sea there is a creature that is sustained entirely from the water. When it gets very hungry, it takes me and eats me. This is the mitzvah that I perform, as it is written (Mishlei 25:22-23), 'If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat... and Hashem will repay you.' Do not read 'and Hashem will repay you,' but rather, 'and Hashem will give you to him'."

While we may never reach this level of love for mitzvos, the Torah teaches us this in order that we may steer our hashkafos in that direction. If we work on viewing each mitzvah as a priceless opportunity to gain a share in the Eternal World, then our mitzvah performance will become meaningful in a new way.

Have a good Shabbos.

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