

GETTING WHAT YOU PAY FOR

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And he dreamed, and behold—a ladder stood on the earth, its head reaching to the heaven, and angels of Hashem were ascending and descending on it. And behold—Hashem was standing over him. And He said, "I am Hashem, G-d of your father Avraham and G-d of Yitzchok; the Land upon which you sleep—I will give it to you and your children..." And Yaakov awoke from his sleep, and he said, "Indeed, Hashem is in this place, and I didn't know." (28:12- 16)

Rashi explains: "Had I known, I wouldn't have gone to sleep here."

At first glance Yaakov's reaction seems unlikely. He just had the most powerful dream in which he experiences prophecy for the first time (see Rashi v. 15). The Holy One makes him and his children for the rest of time all kinds of promises. He was clearly elated with Hashem's guarantee of protection, Providence, and the Land. The next morning, when he leaves, it says (29:1), "And Yaakov's feet carried him, and he went to the land of the Easterners..." Rashi explains, "His feet carried him"—after hearing the good tidings, his heart carried his feet, and it became easy for him to walk." Yaakov hopped-and-skipped to Charan. So why the regret? "Had I known, I wouldn't have slept here!" What would he have done?

Also puzzling is that Yaakov, having said what he says about falling asleep in the holiest of sites, apparently goes back to sleep. (v. 18) "And Yaakov got up in the morning and he took the stone that he had placed at his head..."

Once-upon-a-time, when cellular phones were the privilege of the rich and/or extremely important, there was an very wealthy and well-connected businessman who refused to allow himself the luxury, much to the chagrin of his customers and business partners who wished he was more accessible. His son—the father's right hand man—wasn't blessed with the same frugality, and carried his prestigious prize wherever he went, availing himself of its convenience with complete disregard for its expense.

"Tell me," an associate once asked the father, "you're the boss. But when I want to get hold of you you're never around. 'He's not in the office... he's travelling...' Your son—he's a pleasure. Whenever I need him, I just dial up his cell phone, and he picks up. The boss can't afford the luxury, but the second-in-command can and does?"

"My son," he said, "has a wealthy father; I did not."

Seforno tells us what Yaakov would have done: "Indeed, Hashem is in this place, and I didn't know'—had I known, I would have prepared myself to receive prophecy, which I did not."

Yaakov wasn't agitated by the content of the prophecy. It wasn't that he slept, or how or where he slept. What bothered him was that he had achieved such elevation, such majesty, without having put in any effort.

A ridiculously large percentage of major lottery winners are broke within five years of their windfall. They did nothing to earn their money, and attach little value to it. Easy come, the saying goes, easy go.

Of course we all like something-for-nothing. In a perverse quirk of human nature, we just can't resist a freebie. Witness the mob scene at a well-stacked buffet, or even just Shabbos-kiddush cake-and-herring. That last cheese danish lustfully snatched off the table at the bris could be had in abundance at the bakery down the street for \$1.50. But it's not free.

How about the free siddurim, tehillim'lach or sefarim given out at simchos. We sometimes get quite bitter if we didn't get one. I wonder: What if I set up a table outside the dining hall and sell the same sefer for \$1, just one dollar? Well I've never tried it, and I'm not likely to any time soon, but I have a sneaking suspicion I'd be left with boxes of the cherished goods. "Oh, it's costs a dollar, oh, ok—I'll think about it."

Yaakov felt that in some way such an awesome experience was 'wasted' by not having put anything into it. "Had I known Hashem would appear to me here I would have prepared myself for prophecy, making the experience even more lasting and meaningful."

In Sha'arei Teshuva, Rabbeinu Yona writes about the dangers of pushing-off teshuva (repentance), of which there are many. One of them is this: If a person has gone astray in a certain area, and neglects to take the time and effort to perform proper teshuva, it is almost certain he will sin again.

While in many ways teshuva is a positive experience, and ultimately releases one from the bond of sin and seduction, done properly it does have a bitter side. The first step of teshuva is charata, regret.

True regret is unpleasant. If you've ever lost something valuable—a wedding ring or a lot of money—especially if you were at fault, the pangs of regret eat away at you. Part of true teshuva is to have these feelings. The more one suffers from the experience, he says, the greater the impact of the process, and the less likely one is to allow oneself to be foolishly drawn back into the trap.

"Rigzu ve-al techeta'u—be agitated and do not sin (Tehillim/Psalms 4:5)." Rogez, he explains, refers specifically to the agitation we experience after realizing we've done wrong, like Yosef told his brothers, "Al tirg'zu—don't agitate (over having sold me into slavery—Bereishis/Genesis 45:24))." Rigzu—to the extent that we agonize over our past wrongs, ve-al techeta'u—we will be protected from revisiting them.

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 17a) tells the story of Elazer ben Durdaya, who left no stone unturned in his quest to experience all the pleasures our world has to offer, with complete disregard for the Torah and its mitzvos. One day, in the midst of sin, he was suddenly struck by the deepest pangs of teshuva, and began crying uncontrollably until he collapsed and passed away. Soon after, a heavenly voice was heard, "Fortunate are you, R' Elazer ben Durdaya—you have been accepted into Olam Ha-ba (the World to Come)." Hearing this, Rebbi (Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi) cried, "There are those who spend their entire lives to be accepted, while others are accepted in a moment."

Everyone asks: Why did Rebbi cry? Nobody will suffer as a result of his Olam Ha-ba—it wasn't taken from anyone else? Perhaps Rebbi cried not because of, but for R' Elazer. True he did full repentance; he was accepted unconditionally into the World to Come. But can the Olam Ha-ba attained 'in a moment' really compare with the Olam Ha-ba of one who invested his life to get there? Rebbi cried for R' Elazer, for he would never have the opportunity to appreciate the pleasures of those who toiled on this world. (Ma'ayan Ha-Shavua)

In his dream, Yaakov is shown a ladder. He sleeps at its bottom, and it's a long way to go to reach Shomayim. True, he was given his first 'taste' of prophecy gratis, but he's also made to realize that the only way to reach the heights is to climb the ladder, step by step.

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