

A GENEROUS EYE

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the parsha of Vayishlach--"And Yaakov (on the way back to Yitzchak, his father after leaving the house of Lavan) sent messengers (angels, according to Rashi) to Esav his brother. [32:4]" Although they came with a conciliatory message, the reception they got from Esav indicated that he was not coming with a sense of brotherhood...

"And Yaakov became very afraid. [32:8]"

The Medrash [Yalkut Shimoni 131] explains what it was that scared Yaakov so much. All of these years (while I, Yaakov, was away) he (Esav) was in Eretz Yisroel [the Land of Israel]; he is therefore coming at me with the merit of Eretz Yisroel. All of these years he was fulfilling the mitzvah [commandment] of honoring our parents, he is therefore coming at me with the merit of kibud av v'eim [honoring one's parents].

At first glance this seems to be astounding. The sages teach that on the very day of Avrohom's death, Esav committed five very serious transgressions. Yaakov on the other hand was described as a pure man who dwelled in the tents of Torah. Being that in terms of mitzvos Yaakov was so far ahead, why was he afraid of Esav's two mitzvos?

Rav Yaakov Neiman in Darchei Mussar explains that a truly great person is able to focus on a quality in another person and thereby humble himself, even though he himself might have many more qualities. As the Ramban wrote in his classic Igeres [letter] to his son: Find a quality in every person that is lacking in yourself and thus humble yourself before every person.

A person should inspect his own actions with a critical eye while viewing the actions of others in a generous manner. Yaakov looked at Esav with a generous eye and was thus genuinely afraid of the merits he felt Esav had going for him.

Rav Yerucham, zt"l, the great Mashgiach [spiritual leader] of the Mir Yeshiva, once stood looking out onto a main street of Warsaw. He was so impressed with the Jews there who walked around openly exhibiting their Judaism. Although these were Jews who filled their days with business dealings while Rav Yerucham was involved day and night in Torah and avodas [service of] Hashem, he humbled himself before them.

A realization that was reached this past summer was very eye opening for me and perhaps could also shed some light on Yaakov's fear of Esav.

It actually began when I, as a teenager, had returned home after studying in Israel much strengthened in my religious observance. Some people who were very close to me had a degree of difficulty with the new me. They were more than able to accept that I had found something that gave me gratification and were genuinely happy for me. At the same time, they knew that I felt that my way of life was not only best for me but was also best for them. Even though I hadn't said or done anything to indicate that, they knew that inherent in my belief that Hashem gave the Torah to the Jewish Nation was the understanding that this was a way of life for the entire nation. They knew I felt that they should be doing what I was doing and this bothered them.

I tried to counter by saying that if I didn't have the set of beliefs that I had, I would certainly want to lead my life in the down-to-earth, wholesome manner that they were living. But I did have that set of beliefs. This led to much tension in relationships that were and still are very dear to me.

Although over the years many things had changed and it was no longer such a glaring issue nevertheless it had never been totally resolved. This past summer however, a conversation that I had with one of these people enabled us to view things in a different light.

Each person is different; each person has had different experiences and each person experiences and is affected by even the same experience in a different way. As such, even if one is more observant than another, one can't know who is finding greater favor in Hashem's eyes. Perhaps taking into account whom that person is and what that person has experienced, that lesser level of observance is considered a greater challenge and represents a greater accomplishment than another's higher level of observance.

Perhaps that is why Yaakov, a pure person who dwelled in the tents of Torah, was so afraid of Esav's merit of Eretz Yisroel and kibud av v'eim [honoring one's parents]. Perhaps Hashem viewed those two mitzvos as a greater accomplishment than his avodah [service].

There's no way to know how Hashem is judging us vis-à-vis someone else but by finding the qualities in others we can hope that Hashem will focus on the qualities in us.

Good Shabbos,
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