

THOSE SMALL JARS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Vayeitzei

We have entered the month of Kislev-the month of Chanukah. Coincidentally (Hey! Don't we believe that there is not such thing as a coincidence?), there happens to be a very interesting hint to Chanukah in the parsha. From next week's parsha we have the following possuk:

... Ya'akov took them and crossed them over the river and all that was with him. Ya'akov remained alone ... (Bereishis 32:24)

The verse refers to Ya'akov's return to Canaan in advance of next week's confrontation with Eisav. On his way back from Padan Aram and all his years with his uncle Lavan, he had to cross the Yavok river. Person by person, piece by piece, Ya'akov moved each from one side of the river to the other. However, nightfall caught him on the "wrong" side of the river, where he fought with the "stranger" whom the midrash identifies as Eisav's angel. What had caused him to be there at that time? The Talmud tells us:

He remained for small jars (Chullin 91a).

The midrash tells us his reward for going back for those "small jars":

God said to Ya'akov, "For endangering yourself for a small container, I Myself will repay your children with a small container to the Chashmonaim [at the time of Chanukah]." (Midrash Tzeidah LaDerech)

What made Ya'akov so conscientious that, after a full day of traveling and moving, he went back for those little containers. The truth is, the container Ya'akov returned for was no ordinary container, nor was it empty, as the following midrash makes clear:

From where did Ya'akov get this jar? When he picked up the stones from under his head (this week's parsha) and returned them in the morning, he found a stone that had a jar of oil in it, and he used it to pour on the top stone (of the monument he built). When it refilled itself, Ya'akov knew it was set aside for G-d. He said, "It's not right to leave this here ..." (Yalkut Reuveni, VaYishlach)

(This happened at the beginning of an exile that would last thirty-six years, the number of candles we light over the eight days of Chanukah.)

Hmmmm. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Oil that replenishes itself. In fact, the above midrash continues, this same oil lasted throughout the generations, and was even used to anoint the Mishkan (Tabernacle) in Moshe's day ... hundreds of years later, and it never lost a drop (12 log of oil, one for each of the twelve rocks he slept on)! Not only that, but the same oil pops up in a few miraculous stories in the Prophets' time as well, and who knows where it went next?! All we know is that, during the time of the Chashmonaim, oil that should have lasted for only one day, lasted for eight days in the end!

We'll talk more about the connection between the upcoming parshios and Chanukah in the upcoming weeks ... Just remember the number thirty-six, and the Chanukah candles.

Vayishlach

Ya'akov, on his way back to Canaan to confront Eisav, sent his family and belongings, across the Yavok river (an eastern tributary of the Jordan, approximately half-way between the Kinneret and the Dead Sea). However, he himself, instead of crossing the river with his belongings remained behind to retrieve some small containers, even though it meant spending the night alone out in the open. But it was well worth it, since for retrieving these small, seemingly unimportant containers, Ya'akov was greatly rewarded:

G-d said to Ya'akov, "For endangering yourself for a small container, I Myself will repay your children with a small container to the Chashmonaim." (Midrash Tzeida Laderech)

The "small container" repaid to the Chashmonaim was the famous small jar of oil that remained spiritually pure after the Temple's desecration at the time of Chanukah. As the rabbis point out, finding even just one jar of oil whose priestly seal had not been broken (indicating that the oil was still fitting for use in the menorah), was also a miracle. The Greeks had maliciously defiled all the oil in the Temple, but miraculously overlooked this one jar that was hidden away (thus two miracles actually occurred: the first one was finding the undefiled oil, and the second was the fact that the oil burned for seven extra days, which is why we celebrate all eight days as opposed to only the last seven days during which the second miracle originally occurred). From the above midrash, it appears that this was the reward for Ya'akov's act .

But what possible relationship could there be between Ya'akov's bravery to retrieve the containers and a miracle that wouldn't occur for another 1,300 years? On the other hand, why did Ya'akov go back for the containers? The following midrash (mentioned last week) explains what made those jars so valuable:

From where did Ya'akov get this jar? When he picked up the stones from under his head (this week's

parsha) and returned them in the morning, he found a stone that had a jar of oil in it, and he used it to pour on the top stone (of the monument he built). When it refilled itself, Ya'akov knew it was set aside for G-d. He said, "It's not right to leave this here ..." (Yalkut Reuveni, VaYishlach)

Hence, Ya'akov had not returned for just any old containers; he had returned for the special oil he had found thirty-four years earlier. But why did that prompt a reward in the time of the future Chashmonaim? What does oil symbolize?

Ha-shemen (the oil) is made up of the same letters as "neshama" (nun, shin, mem, heh), which means soul. Like the soul, olive oil is something that exists below the surface, and seems non-existent until some sort of process is performed to reveal it. Just like the olive must be squeezed to produce light-giving oil from a seemingly bitter olive, so too must the body be "squeezed" before the light of the soul can be revealed. This is the role of a mitzvah, which creates a spiritual crisis of sorts to draw the soul out of the person and make them "shine."

Ya'akov was constantly putting himself on the line, first to get the birthright, and then later to get the blessings. Then he had to survive the evil Lavan, and confront Eisav on the way home, even risking his life for the miraculous oil ... all in the name of fulfilling G-d's master plan. Rarely did he complain, but always did he do his best.

It was his soul that shone throughout Ya'akov's life, and in this respect, his self-sacrifice was his connection to the story of Chanukah, since the Chashmonaim had put physical safety second after spiritual freedom. This was symbolized by their quick return to the Temple to rekindle the Menorah though their military victory had yet to be completed. And, as the midrash alludes, it was Ya'akov's initial self-sacrifices that planted the seeds for similar self-sacrifices in the time of the Chashmonaim, and the miracle of Chanukah, 1300 years later.

Vayishlach

After Ya'akov successfully survived Eisav, physically and ideologically, he moved on to Shechem where he camped with his family. The possuk tells us that Leah went out to see what the place was like, which is what put her into view of Shechem ben Chamor (literally, Shechem, the son of a donkey!), the son of the head of Shechem. It did not take long for Shechem to force his way with Dinah, and then desire her as a wife.

The physical violation of any woman is a horrific thing-how much more so for a daughter of a nation that prides itself on being modest and acting holy. The news of what happened sent shock waves throughout Ya'akov's family, and certainly dampened the spirit of success and Divine approval Ya'akov felt up until then. He had "struggled with G-d and with man," and had prevailed. Yet, shortly

after, he was humbled by Shechem ben Chamor, and had suffered such incredible personal and national disaster.

Yet, in spite of all this, Ya'akov still acted with equanimity. Though every cell in his body must have yelled out, "Revenge!" he kept his peace, even accepting Shechem and his father into his camp, and their request to intermarry (after performing Bris Milah).

Not so Shimon and Levi. As the Chumash relates, on the third day after Bris Milah, Shimon and Levi went into the city of Shechem and wiped out everyone, men, women, and children. They brought Dinah home as well. Later on, at the end of Sefer Bereishis, Ya'akov will criticize his son's behavior and even curse their anger for the damage it causes. He will tell them how they acted like Eisav, and not like B'nei Ya'akov, children of Ya'akov, by taking up sword to avenge the wrong done to their sister. But what should they have done? What did Ya'akov do?

Ya'akov, first and foremost, acknowledged the Divine Providence in all of it. He did a cheshbon hanefesh, an accounting of his actions, to see what he may have done, or may not have done, that could have led to such a disaster. He mourned the results for sure, but then he set about on a course of self-correction, in order to open the path for more favorable Divine Providence in the future.

Historically, there have been times when fighting physical battles have been the key to enlisting G-d's help (witness the battle against the Greeks at the time of Chanukah). However, even that battle had not been a totally physical one. First Mattisyahu and his group created an air of tshuva, and inspired zealousness in mitzvos against all odds. It was this self-sacrifice for Torah values that led to their inspiration to fight the Greeks though they were greatly outnumbered, and which led to the miracles on the battlefield and in the Temple (with the menorah).

No matter what the final response to bad events in our lives or in the lives of others may be in the end, personally or nationally, whatever we decide to do must be predicated on some soul-searching, and then a commitment to improve spiritually. This is the key to turn events around in our favor, and invoke that special light that G-d sends down whenever the world needs a miracle, and which shines out through the thirty-six candles we light during Chanukah.

Vayeishev

This is the parsha during which everything breaks loose. As if going back on their word (and destroying Shechem in the process) wasn't enough, Ya'akov's sons saw fit to sell Yosef into slavery and plunge their father into 22 years of mourning. And in the midst of all of this, Yehuda unwittingly became the father of the Moshiach by "accidentally" taking his past daughter-in-law, Tamar, as a wife. There's certainly what to talk about in this week's parsha!

The following midrash provides a brief summation:

The tribes were involved with the sale of Yosef; Yosef was immersed in mournful thoughts about his separation from his father; Reuven was involved with mourning over his sin; Ya'akov was mourning for Yosef; Yehuda was busy taking a wife for himself (Tamar). And the Holy One, Blessed is He, was busy creating the light of Moshiach. (Bereishis Rabbah 85:2)

From this midrash, it seems that everyone was acting out the fulfillment of a master plan they knew about, but yet, were unaware of. But make no mistake about it-every detail, the good ones and the bad ones, were pieces in a puzzle that envisioned a glorious redemption and fulfillment of creation.

Stepping back, the above midrash sounds very much like the dreidel played with on Chanukah, which, unlike the gragger of Purim, is spun from the top to rotate the bottom (the gragger is spun from the bottom to rotate the top). According to the Ta'amei HaMinhagim (Chanukah, 859), which explores the origins of traditions, this difference between the dreidel and the gragger is not accidental; on the contrary, each was designed to reveal the nature of the miracle that gave rise to the holiday.

In Mordechai's time, the miracle was a hidden one, coming very much through nature. It was Mordechai who prompted the miracle, by going out of his way to antagonize Haman, who, in turn, sought to destroy the Jewish people. In the beginning, the Jews questioned Mordechai's dangerous attitude towards Haman. However, in the end, like all such evil dictators, his attack on the Jewish people triggered his own demise, albeit quite miraculously. Mordechai "spun" first from the world below, and that prompted a miracle from Above.

On the other hand, Mattisyahu was "pulled" into his rebellion against the Greeks. As the story goes, he had seen a Jew sacrificing an impure animal on a pagan altar, which incensed him to the point that he killed both the Jew and the Greek soldier. The result was a perceived rebellion, and a battle that led to the obvious miracles we mention during Chanukah, first the one on the battlefield and then of the oil that burned seven extra days. Heaven "spun" from Above first, and that caused a reaction below.

The story of Yosef and his brothers seems to be a disagreement over which mode history was in at the time. Was it in the "Purim" mode, or the "Chanukah" mode? Was it a time to take history into their own hands and make things happen, or was it a time to see what Heaven was up to, and respond to that?

From Ya'akov's passive response to Shechem it seems as if he was in a Chanukah-like mode. From Shimon's and Levi's revenge on Shechem last week, and the selling of Yosef in this week's parsha, it seems as if the brothers sided with the Purim mode. In fact, according to the midrash, the brothers even included G-d in their selling of Yosef, and swore Him to secrecy, so-to-speak, so that He wouldn't tell Ya'akov about what they had done with Yosef!

In the end, as the midrash above indicated, Ya'akov and Yosef had been right all along. While

everyone had been running around like "chickens with their heads cut off," G-d had been masterfully and subtly guiding all the events like the master orchestrator that He is towards history's grand finale-the creation of Moshiach. And as a result, whereas the brothers saw themselves as the saviors and shapers of Jewish destiny, it turned out that they had been unwitting pawns in G-d's plan to place Yosef in power, and pave the way for Egyptian oppression, and eventual redemption.

It is a lesson to take to heart. We have to make sure that we are in the right mode at the right time to work with G-d, and be a real maker of history. As the brothers will find out a few parshios from now, nothing is worse than thinking you are the maker of your own destiny, only to find out, in the end, that you were just a pawn in someone else's.

Vayeishev

"... The well was empty, there was no water inside it." (Bereishis 37:24)

From the fact that it says the well was empty, would it not be clear there was no water inside? Rather, it teaches you that there was no water inside, but there were snakes and scorpions. (Shabbos 22a)

What makes this midrash fascinating is that it is found in the only gemora that deals with Chanukah, and that it follows this halacha:

... Chanukah candles placed higher than twenty amos (about 30 feet) are possul [they do not fulfill the mitzvah] since the eye cannot see clearly [something placed at that height].

Is there a connection between the two statements? True, they are both taught over in the name of the same rabbi. But it is uncanny that the Talmudists would "randomly" wedge this verse about Yosef and its midrashic interpretation of it into Chanukah halachos. Perhaps there is another deeper, yet more subtle connection?

To begin with, why hadn't Yosef's brothers noticed the miracle? Yosef was sharing space with poisoness roommates, and none were causing him any harm! Wasn't that a miracle, and don't miracles come from G-d? Perhaps, if they had seen the miracle, they might have had pause to reconsider their harsh judgement of his character, and redeem him. Just think of how much suffering would have been avoided if they had! However, they hadn't noticed the miracle and had instead let Yosef go as a slave.

Chanukah is a holiday that says: Little is what it appears to be on the surface. By lighting the candles during the week of Chanukah, we are committing ourselves to the task of peeking below the surface of people and ideas to find their inner essence, to determine their validity or falsehood. Chanukah

says,

"Open your mind's eye and see! Until Moshiach comes, G-d's truth must be sought out and found by the inquisitive and honest mind."

This is, perhaps, why the two statements are juxtaposed in the Talmud. It is as if to say that the brothers' perception of what was happening on the "outside" did not line up with what was happening on the "inside." The olive they could see, but the oil inside they overlooked; Yosef the young boy they noticed, but the powerful and mature soul inside they missed entirely. It was if this perception of Yosef was out of their mental eyeshot, like a menorah placed higher than 20 amos.

It is a confusing world out there. There is a lot of information jostling for room in our minds, much of it being unnecessary and even false. In an age saturated with information, never before has it been more crucial to have a discerning mind, in order to sift through the knowledge looking for the kernels of truth in order to discard the debris. Never before has the message of Yosef and his brothers, and of the menorah of Chanukah, been more relevant than in our generation.

Have a Happy Chanukah!

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