

OUT, UP, AND ON HIS WAY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

He dreamed of a ladder that was standing on the ground with the top of it reaching into heaven, with angels of G-d going up and down. G-d was standing above him, and said, "I am G-d, the L-rd of Avraham your father, and the L-rd of Yitzchak. The land upon which you are lying, I will give to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will become like the dust of the earth, and will spread out to the west, east, north and south. All the families of the earth will be blessed through you, and through your descendants. See that I am with you, and I will watch over you anywhere you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not abandon you until I have done what I have told you." Ya'akov awoke from his sleep and said, "Indeed, G-d is in this place, and yet I didn't know it." (Bereishis 28:12-16)

From the Torah, the account of the Ya'akov's dream seems straightforward enough. Ya'akov is shown a prophecy of the rise of the great empires that would eventually exile and even persecute his descendants, and their fall to oblivion while the Jewish people live on under Divine protection, outlasting them all. It is the Midrash that undoes the simplicity of Ya'akov's dream and its interpretation.

The Midrash says that when Ya'akov dreamed of the ladder, at the end of the dream when all the angels representing the four nations had ascended, G-d invited Ya'akov to climb the ladder as well. Ya'akov declined. Why? Because he had been afraid, after seeing the previous angels climb the ladder only to descend after, that he too would be forced to descend in the end. G-d told him,

"Don't be afraid Ya'akov, because you will ascend and never descend." However, Ya'akov didn't have faith, and he didn't go up. Rebi Becheryah learned in the name of Rebi Meir that Ya'akov had made a mistake by not trusting in the wonders of G-d, who told him, "If you had trusted and had ascended, you would never have come down again. However, now that you didn't trust [in Me] and ascend, your descendants will have to endure the four exiles ..." (Vayikra Rabbah 29:2)

The commentators quickly add, "G-d forbid that we should think that Ya'akov, that perfect and faithful individual, didn't trust in G-d! It was in himself that Ya'akov didn't believe, and he worried that his and his descendants' shortcomings would lead to sin and cause G-d to abandon them." However, as humble as Ya'akov's self-perception may have been, still:

One who trusts in G-d will be surrounded by chesed (Tehillim 32:10). Rebi Elazar said in the name of Rebi Abba: Even an evil person who trusts in G-d will be surrounded by chesed. (Midrash Tehillim, Mizmor 32:3)

What this means is that trust in G-d is a merit unto itself. Normally, to receive G-d's assistance, we have to merit it through our actions. If we do mitzvos, then G-d may shower us with kindness; if we transgress, then G-d may cause us trouble to inspire teshuvah. However, if a person trusts in G-d and believes that He is there to help him at all times, even though when it comes to the rest of Torah and mitzvos, he is undeserving, still, miracles may happen for him because of his high level of trust in G-d!

Nothing stands in the way of trust in G-d!

In fact, the only time trust in G-d doesn't work is when it is that very trust that causes one to sin. For example, if a person transgresses and says, "I am confident that G-d will help me, so why worry about the repercussions of sinning?" then G-d will not act with chesed toward such a person. As the Ramban writes:

"This is the reason why it says, "Trust in G-d and do good ..." (Tehillim 37:3), and not "Do good and trust in G-d," for, trust is not dependent upon one's good deeds at all; rather, one should trust in G-d whether he is a righteous individual or an evil one. In any case, he should later make amends, because G-d is patient but will eventually find a time and place to punish the person for his bad deeds. (HaEmunah v'HaBitachon, Chapter One) Thus, in the end, even had Ya'akov found himself unworthy of Divine protection, and even should the Jewish people sink to a level that warrants Divine abandonment, still, when G-d says "Climb the ladder," you climb. When G-d says, "Cross the sea," you cross. And when a Jew finds himself in a predicament and in desperate need Divine intervention, and he wonders, "What have I done to deserve this chesed?" he should forge ahead and trust in G-d. Let the gratefulness you feel toward G-d for His help act as inspiration to do the proper teshuvah once you reach the "other side."

Shabbos Day:

Then Ya'akov said to Lavan, "Give me my wife, since I have fulfilled my days, so I can consummate with her. Lavan gathered all the local people and made a wedding feast. At night, he [Lavan] took Leah his daughter and brought her to him [Ya'akov], and he consummated with her ... In the morning, [Ya'akov realized] it was Leah and he said to Lavan, "What have you done to me? Wasn't it for Rachel that I worked? Why have you tricked me?" (Bereishis 29:21-25)

There are few surprises more disturbing than finding out that one has married the wrong person, not to mention all the legally problematic issues that result from such a mistake. Just to make sure it

doesn't happen twice, the man has since raised the veil of his future wife-to-be just before they make their way to the chupah and a life together.

The truth is, there is no such thing as a "mistaken marriage" in Judaism because, in such circumstances, de facto, the marriage is annulled. That Ya'akov was surprised by the introduction of Leah into his own, personal family is understood. That Ya'akov remained married to Leah after the fact, after he was "tricked" into marrying her is reason to pause and think. And, the fact that Leah gave birth to two of the most important tribes in the Jewish people--Yehudah and Levi--from whom descends Jewish kingship, kohanim ... and even Moshiach himself! only piques one's curiosity as to just what was happening here! And what about the other two mothers, Zilpah and Bilhah?

The answer comes by first appreciating that for someone like Ya'akov, everything was a matter of Divine Providence. The rabbis say of Ya'akov that, if anyone fulfilled the dictum of "All is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of G-d" (Brochos 33b), it was Ya'akov. Ya'akov lived with the knowledge that all the best and most devious plans of the enemies of the Jewish people have no way to be successful--unless it is ordained in Heaven to be that way. This is why he would have had to accept Leah as a wife in the end.

If so, then to whom is Ya'akov addressing his question, if not to G-d?

So fine. Let's say that ultimately, Ya'akov is questioning G-d, and not Lavan. Still, how could he do even that? If Ya'akov trusted G-d completely, and knew that Lavan had no power of his own, then why didn't he accept his fate lovingly? Why was he so bothered by the fact that he was duped into marrying a woman not of his dreams?

Because there shouldn't have been a Leah, or a Zilpah, or a Bilhah, just like there shouldn't have been an Eisav. There should only have been a Rachel, and the fact that there was a Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah meant that creation was not as far down the road to spiritual rectification of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as Ya'akov had assumed, and that's what bothered Ya'akov most.

One way to measure the disastrous effect of Adam's sin on creation was the impact it had on the collective souls of both Adam and Chava. The more spiritually pure creation is, the more unified all its elements are; the more spiritually impure creation, the more creation will fracture into ever smaller fragments. Our own world is indicative of this reality by the way we cannot unify the nations except into a loose affiliation that is based, for the most part, on personal needs, such as national security.

The Zohar explains that the souls of Rachel, Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah, were really four parts of one soul, also called "Rachel." Rectification of creation includes the reunification of all four parts into one soul, just as Ya'akov absorbed Eisav into his being by first buying the birthright, and then by taking the blessings in last week's parshah.

Ya'akov understood this, which is why he was, at least in the beginning, entirely devoted to Rachel from the moment he first saw her. Gradually, as the tribes were born, Ya'akov accepted that more work was left to be done to bring creation back to its perfected state, and that it would have to be done in stages, first through him, then through the unification of his sons. It wouldn't be until the entire nation, all three million descendants of the Shevatim, would stand at Har Sinai hundreds of years later, that such unification of souls could finally take place (k'ish echad b'leiv echad; see Rashi on Shemos 19:3), as Ya'akov had anticipated and for which he worked.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Ya'akov made a vow saying, "If G-d will be with me, and take care of me on the path I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and then bring me back in peace to my father's house, then G-d will be my L-rd." (Bereishis 28:20-21)

"... Sinless, so that I don't learn from the ways of Lavan." (Rashi)

Rashi interprets the word "peace" (shalom) as meaning "complete" (shalaim) as well, rendering the verse to mean that Ya'akov was asking for protection against his evil and sly uncle, Lavan. Though Ya'akov was fleeing from the danger of his murdering brother Eisav, he was running into the arms of his dangerous uncle, Lavan, hardly a place of refuge.

Yet, Lavan presented a challenge of a different kind. Whereas Eisav was a threat to Ya'akov's physical life, Lavan posed a threat to Ya'akov's spiritual life. He hinted at this at the beginning of next week's parshah, when he told Eisav:

"With Lavan I lived (garti) ..." (Bereishis 32:5)

The word "garti" is spelled: gimmel, reish, tav, yud, letters which add up to 613--taryag--the number of mitzvos in the Torah. Ya'akov was telling Eisav that, in spite of the fact that he lived with Lavan for twenty years, he managed to avoid Lavan's influence and stay true to the Torah--the ways of his fathers.

We are accustomed to praying to G-d for parnassa-reasons (earning a living). We are used to praying to G-d for physical protection from our enemies, and for success in family issues, like raising good children and finding good marriage partners for them. But how many Jews, while living in exile, pray to G-d for protection from the influences of the host society around them?

Yet, that is clearly the greatest danger one faces when one goes into exile, be it a "friendly" exile, or a hostile one. As I write this d'var Torah, it is literally four hours after landing in New York after leaving Israel 12 hours earlier. In the short time I have been here, including the time on the airplane, I already feel a "pull" to be more lenient with respect to religious issues that, back home in Telzstone, are never an issue for me.

Being settled in one place empowers a person to take control of one's spiritual life; how much more so is this true when one lives in a spiritual environment that supports spiritual growth, and in a country that enhances the search for such holiness. The yetzer hara uses displacement as an ideal time to weaken a person's spiritual resolve. Exile is a time of spiritual vulnerability, and the yetzer hara knows this only too well.

Ya'akov Avinu knew this well too. This is why he enlisted the help of G-d against his yetzer hara, and taught us to do the same as well when we have to live among the Lavans of our time. The effect may be insidious, and the nicer the host nation is to us, the more dangerous it may be to the spiritual growth of the Jew. Hence, Ya'akov not only prayed to G-d for help against the influence of Lavan, but for the ongoing sensitivity to recognize when he was subtly being pulled in the ways of his wily uncle.

Melave Malkah:

Ya'akov went on his way, and angels of G-d met him. When he saw them, Ya'akov said, "This is an encampment of G-d." So he called the place "Machanaim" [Camps]. (Bereishis 32:2-3)

"Angels of Israel came to meet him to escort him to Eretz Yisroel." (Rashi)

It was the ideal aliyah. Not only was Ya'akov met at the border of Eretz Yisroel by the appropriate agents, but he was even encouraged to make aliyah to Eretz Yisroel, by angels yet! (Now there's a novel idea.)

There is great contrast between the previous section, during which Ya'akov is confronted by the angry Lavan, and this one that describes his return back home to Eretz Yisroel. One can feel the exile of Ya'akov come to an end, heralded by the accompaniment of the holy angels.

To what did Ya'akov owe this merit? Was it because he had remained true to Torah all the years he had been gone? There is no question that this was a Divine stamp of approval for his behavior away. However, the verse itself adds something that indicates at least part of Ya'akov's special merit:

Ya'akov went on his way ...

The verse didn't have to tell us this. It could have merely said that Lavan took leave of Ya'akov, and that Ya'akov was then met by angels of G-d. Why the emphasis of "on his way"?

"His way" here did not simply mean that Ya'akov went on his way back home, though true as this may be on a pshat level. "His way," in this context meant, "on his way" to fulfilling the purpose of his life, and of creation for that matter. It is while on this "way" that one merits such Heavenly assistance, indeed, even angels as an accompaniment. For, when one walks along this "way," he is always

making "aliyah," always growing closer to G-d.

Have a great Shabbos,

Pinchas Winston

Rabbi Winston's Schedule in America and Canada...

November 23: Beth Tikvah Synagogue, Dollards Des Ormeaux, Quebec

November 24 - November 30: Toronto (various locations)

December 1: Silver Spring, Maryland (contact: Pinchus Idstein, 301-681-3508)

December 2, 3, 4: New York

December 5 (Shabbaton): Congregation Ohav Emeth, Highland Park, New Jersey

December 6: New York (location to be confirmed)
