

LEAVING... A GOOD IMPRESSION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Ya'akov left Be'er Sheva and went to Charan. He arrived (vayifgah) at the place and stayed over night there, because the sun set ... (Bereishis 28:10-11)

"And he arrived at the place: We learn that Ya'akov originated the custom of Aravis (Evening Prayer) ..." (Rashi)

Basically, a Jewish male thirteen years and older has an obligation to pray three times a day: morning, afternoon, and evening. According to the Talmud (Brochos 26b), the Forefathers were responsible for originating all three services: Avraham established Shacharis, Yitzchak established Minchah, and, as Rashi points out on this posuk, Ya'akov originated the Evening Service.

Curiously, the first two prayer services are considered obligatory, while the last one, Aravis, is called a "reshus," meaning, a non-obligatory mitzvah (Brochos 27b). Tosfos even comments by saying, "Even though it is a 'reshus,' still, one should not miss it without good reason, because Ya'akov established it."

The question is, why the difference? What was lacking from Ya'akov's tefillah--if anything at all--that lessened the sense of obligation for all the generations that followed to emulate it?

To begin with, there is a technical answer that has nothing to do with Ya'akov or his dovening. The daily prayer service also corresponds to the two daily Continual-Offerings (Korban Tamid) that were brought in Temple times, one in the morning and one in the late afternoon. There was no such sacrifice brought in the evening.

However, based upon the following, we do see a difference between the circumstances that led to Avraham's and Yitzchak's tefillos, and that of Ya'akov's:

"It says in Perek Gid Hanashe (Chullin 91b) with respect to the posuk, 'Ya'akov went to Charan,' that he [Ya'akov] needed to return, saying, 'Is it possible that I passed this place [and did not pray]?' From this it is clear that he prayed Aravis while it was still daytime, because he still intended to return after he finished praying. This is difficult for the teaching in the first chapter that says that it isn't time for the [Evening] Prayer until the stars come out ... (Tosfos, Brochos 26a, q.v. Ya'akov Tikein Tefillos Aravis)

In other words:

Ya'akov, while in exile, did not establish the Evening Prayer until after he arrived in Charan first, saw Rachel, and then arrived back at the place (i.e., the Temple Mount back in Jerusalem) ... (Asarah Ma'ameros)

And then, after finishing his "Evening Prayer" while STILL day, Ya'akov had planned to return to Charan. This is why G-d had to perform the miracle of making the sun set earlier that day, to force Ya'akov to stay on the Temple Mount over night, proving that Ya'akov dovened Aravis during the last part of the day.

All things considered (and a few I didn't mention), Ya'akov's tefillah was not quite the same as his father's and grandfather's, not because of anything to do with Ya'akov himself, but more to do with the circumstances that led to the establishment of his prayer service. Then again, maybe all things considered, this is why Aravis is a mitzvah reshus (that today, for all intents and purposes, is obligatory): to leave room for the person to go out of his way, as Ya'akov did, to offer his heartfelt prayer to his Creator.

Shabbos Day:

Ya'akov arrived at the place and stayed over night there, because the sun set; and he took from the rocks of the place and placed them for his head and he lay down in that place.(Bereishis 28:11)

"This [rock] fought with this [rock], each one saying, 'On me this righteous person will put his head ...' and this one saying, 'On me this righteous person will put his head ...' Immediately, The Holy One, Blessed is He, made them into one rock, and this is why it later says, 'He too the rock (singular) that was there for his head ...'." (Rashi)

This, of course, is a very well-known and well-accepted explanation of the above posuk, and the one that follows (28:18). The only thing, says Tosfos, is that it is not pshat:

"... According to the simple understanding, he took one [rock] from the rocks of the place." (Tosfos, Chullin 91b, q.v. Kesiv Vayikach Es HaEven)

"So what?" one may ask. So this: Rashi usually only "surrenders" to drash (exegetical explanation) when he lacks a simple explanation of a verse. So why not here?

The Vilna Gaon explains, perhaps, what "forced" Rashi in the direction of Midrash. According to the "Gra," it has to do with the literal explanation of the words in the posuk itself, which, read as follows:

Vayikach mei-avnei hamakom--"Ya'akov took from the rocks the place," or, in better English, "Ya'akov took the place FROM the rocks."

As the Gra points out, this explanation is not possible. Therefore he points out that the Hebrew letter "mem" before the word "avnei" (rocks) really belongs on the word "makom" (place), so that the posuk can be properly rendered, "he took of the rocks FROM the place."

Once we make that change, says the Gra, the word "mei-avnei" becomes "avnei" only, which is plural for "rock." But later the Torah refers to only ONE rock? Hence, says the Gra, one has no choice but to resolve this pshat-discrepancy along the lines of Rashi's explanation, in essence, proving that Rashi has been consistent with his approach even here.

What this alludes to is the idea that the times have changed over the millennia: pshat in the days of the Forefathers was vastly different than it has been in later generations. Avraham fought against mighty armies using sand and stones that became weapons as they flew through the air. Rivkah did not draw water from the well; the water drew itself by rising to the occasion, and her bucket. Ya'akov traveled great distances in short periods of time, and dreamed of a ladder that reached into Heaven. This is not just Midrash--this is pshat.

If a person doesn't believe in G-d, then they usually believe in nature as the source of direction for all that has occurred and will ever occur. Without evidence to the contrary, hard, cold, empirical, scientifically verifiable evidence, they assume that life is today as it always was, and what has been reported as miraculous falls into the realm of myth. They have no choice--they don't believe in G-d, the soul, or miracles.

However, Torah-believing Jews know that nature is what G-d wills it to be at any given moment in time. In the Garden of Eden, it was virtually non-existent, and either increases or decreases in time, according to the needs of free-will and history. The rule of creation is, the more overt the Divine Providence (i.e., obvious miracles, be they "positive" or "negative" miracles), the less free-will man is left with to use. And, this is the most important point of all: the less free-will one has to employ, the less one's earning power is for increasing his portion in the World-to-Come.

In the time of the Forefathers, pshat and drush (and even "sod," i.e., Kabbalah) merged into one reality, because, at that time, the needs of free-will were different than they are today. Any analysis of the past based upon what we understand from the present must take this into account, if it is going to be an accurate analysis. But then again, only those who believe this is true will be able to make use of this idea, and appreciate the giants of the past, and the rich past upon which our present has been built.

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 G-d. This stone that I have placed as a monument shall be G-d's temple, and from

everything He gives me I will give one-tenth to Him." (Bereishis 28:20-22)

From EVERYTHING? Did Ya'akov really plan to give one-tenth of ALL that G-d gave him back to G-d? Even from his twelve sons? If so, then Ya'akov didn't fulfill his bargain, because only Levi, that is, only one-twelfth of his children, was set aside for G-d (Levi was devoted to the Temple service).

A certain Kusi asked Rebi Meir this very question, wanting to show that Ya'akov did not indeed keep his word. Rebi Meir answered with the following:

"Actually," began Rebi Meir, "there were really fourteen sons, since Menashe and Ephraim (from Yosef) had status as tribes ..." "That makes the problem greater!" said the Kusi. "But," continued Rebi Meir, "were not the twelve tribes born from four mothers (Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah)?" Rebi Meir asked. "Yes," the Kusi answered. "Each mother, then, had one firstborn son who was already holy to G-d (according to the laws of the firstborn), leaving ten sons. From those ten sons, Ya'akov set aside Levi for service to G-d." Admiringly, the Kusi exclaimed, "Blessed are you and blessed be the people among whom you live!" (Bereishis Rabbah 70:7)

The simpler answer to the Kusi would have been, "Ya'akov did not intend to include his children in the vow." How do we know that? To begin with, from the context of the vow, we see that Ya'akov was talking only about materialistic items. Secondly, "ma'aser" (the halachic term for taking one-tenth of anything), usually only applies to animals, produce, and money; it doesn't apply to children! So what was the message that Ya'akov was really sending to this Kusi?

To answer this, we need to better understand the nature of the Kusi's question, or rather, his statement.

So, let's say it is true with regard to Ya'akov's children, that he did not give one-tenth of his children to G-d. What point could there possibly have been in raising the issue then in Rebi Meir's time, thousands of years in the future? Was the Kusi merely trying to collect an "old debt," on behalf of G-d?

No, the Kusi did not care one iota about Ya'akov's ma'aser. What the Kusi cared about was proving that the Torah cannot be taken literally, thereby proving that we are at liberty to interpret the Torah as we see fit, according to the needs of our time. He was hoping that Rebi Meir would interpret Ya'akov's words by saying that they did not apply to his children, thereby rendering a novel interpretation of the words.

However, Rebi Meir, an expert at dealing with such people, knew where the Kusi was coming from, and answered him accordingly. Rather than fall into the Kusi's "trap," Rebi Meir answered brilliantly, by showing how the words could be taken literally while answering the Kusi's question. Even the Kusi was impressed (though not necessarily convinced), and marveled at the rabbi's sharp mind.

By why here? Why would the Kusi use this particular source to make an attack on traditional Judaism? The answer to this question comes from recalling from whence Ya'akov came, and to

where he was heading.

Ya'akov at this point had just come from outsmarting his brother Eisav (after "stealing" the blessings), and deceiving his father, Yitzchak. He was about to live with Lavan, whom, the Talmud says, he called "his brother in trickery." The Torah calls Ya'akov a "pure" individual, and he is known historically as an "Ish-Emes," a "Man of Truth." Between the lines, the Kushi was questioning the very integrity of all those who have ever followed in Ya'akov Avinu's footsteps, as if to say, "If the 'root' was bad, how good can the 'tree' that grew from it be?"

Rebi Meir answered back, "There is nothing wrong with the 'root,' and, the proof of this is your own analogy: the tree itself. Rather than look for excuses for Ya'akov's actions, as others might have done, I will show you how all that Ya'akov did fits into the framework of Jewish law, even though technically, he wasn't obligated to make sure that it did."

Touché.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Come--Let us sing to G-d; let us blow the shofar to the Rock of our salvation. (Tehillim 95:1)

For those who did not recognize these words rendered into English, this is the first posuk of Kabbalos Shabbos, and the last posuk of the Psalm of the Day for Wednesday. As the Shulchan Aruch (248:1) teaches, one's preparations for the upcoming Shabbos should begin at least three days in advance of Shabbos, from Wednesday onward.

The tehillah was not composed by Dovid HaMelech, but is the sixth of eleven psalms written by Moshe Rabbeinu himself--eleven corresponding the eleven negative forces in creation that Moshe was counteracting (see "Perceptions," Parashas Devarim, 5760).

Apparently, according to the Radak (Tehillim, 91:1), Moshe composed this tehillah in honor of the tribe of Yissachar, who were constantly immersed in the joyous song of Torah. What is the joyous song of Torah? It is shirah, the song of the soul, for, just as the angels are constantly singing praises of G-d and His world, so, too, do our souls sing praises of G-d as well, all the time.

What? You say you can't hear your soul singing?

That's not because it is not. It is because, during the course of daily life, which is filled with materialistic interests, noises, and distractions, the song of our souls gets drowned out, muffled, until it becomes completely inaudible. Torah, when learned with soul, "neutralizes" the body and amplifies the soul. It was Ya'akov's Torah that prepared him for life with Lavan, and gave him the spiritual strength to withstand Lavan's very secular way of life.

And, likewise, the holiness of Shabbos has the power to overtake the mundane world of weekday life, and place our souls on "center stage." However, as the Talmud warns, "You only eat on Shabbos what has been prepared before Shabbos!" (Avodah Zarah 3a). How difficult it is to put the spiritual brakes on moments before Shabbos arrives! Can one honestly expect to simply turn 180 degrees and become Shabbosdik with the momentary disappearance of the sun? If one follows that way of thinking, he may only become enveloped by the holiness of Shabbos just minutes before Shabbos leaves Motzei Shabbos!

Therefore, the rabbis put at least this first posuk in the Wednesday morning Psalm of the Day, like an early warning signal. As one reads these words (with intention), he or she should say, "It's Wednesday already--time to start getting into a Shabbos frame of mind. This way, when Shabbos comes around Friday night, I will already be there waiting for her, ready with the song of my soul, to sing praises of G-d, Shabbos, and Torah."

And on that note, have a great Shabbos,
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