

LEAVING YA'AKOV FOR YISROEL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

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FRIDAY NIGHT:

Many are the thoughts of man, but it is the will of G-d that prevails. (Mishlei 19:21)

At first this posuk makes it sound as if G-d is in competition with us. We have this idea about what we want to accomplish with our lives, but He has His plan as well. And, as Divine Providence would have it, it is His plan that wins out. What can we do, but pray that what makes us happy is what He wants for us as well.

Right . . .

The other alternative is what the rabbis suggest:

Make your will like His will so that His will can become your will. (Pirkei Avos 2:4)

This means that we have to be happy with what G-d wants for us, which is really the journey of life itself. For, unlike what most believe in the Western world, a person's quest for happiness and fulfillment is really what one finds when his will matches that of his Creator, who created man to become fulfilled, but as a result of his own free-will.

That is the odyssey of life. That is the journey of the individual. Like Ya'akov Avinu before us-Ma'aseh Avos siman l'banim-we all "go out" on a personal path with the goal of merging our own with that of G-d. Happy is the person who realizes early that the zigs and the zags of life are really Hashgochah Pratis just moving us along our way to personal completion. Fulfilled is the person who knows how to go with THIS flow, and doesn't waste time resisting the Heavenly "hints" to grow in the direction of personal greatness.

This approach sheds a whole new light on Ya'akov's journey. Rather than ask the question, "How could G-d allow such a thing to happen to such a tzaddik?" we can ask instead, "What was it that Ya'akov Avinu needed to complete his personal journey to completion? Why did Eisav and Lavan specifically become necessary to move Ya'akov in the direction seemed bent on sending him?"

In other words, if becoming "Yisroel" meant reaching the merging point between Ya'akov's plan for his life and that of G-d, then what did Eisav "contribute" to this, and Lavan as well? They were not

incidental to his life, but part-and-parcel of it, otherwise they would never have entered his picture. Surviving the likes of Eisav and Lavan is what made Ya'akov a Yisroel, and given that we are on the same path, albeit in a personalized manner, we ought to understand what it is we must gain from interacting with the Eisavs and Lavans of history.

In other words, Eisav was the firstborn not because he happened to be born first. Rather, he was born first so that Ya'akov could buy the right of the firstborn from him, as opposed to inherit it for free at birth. And, it was also a way of making sure that when it came to his father's blessings, Ya'akov would have to dress up like Eisav and sneak the blessing from under his father's nose to get that which was clearly meant for him since the beginning of time, if not earlier.

Otherwise, the idea would never have come to Rivkah to do so, nor would Ya'akov have consented to carrying out his mother's plan, or have been successful in the end. Gam zu l'tovah-"this too is for the good"-meaning that, whatever it is we have to go through it is not accidental, and is meant to help us achieve a higher level of personal perfection.

SHABBOS DAY:

Ya'akov awoke from his sleep and said, "Indeed, G-d is in this place, and yet I didn't know it." (Bereishis 28:16)

This was something Ya'akov HAD to know. It was something Ya'akov would not have known had he not been chased by his brother out of town, and had the sun not set early on him. He was a different man because of this knowledge, and he turned an important corner as a result of it.

Likewise, this too he had to learn, and was sent out by G-d, that is, Divine Providence, to learn it:

He was frightened and said, "How awesome is this place! It is none other than the house of G-d, and this is the gate of Heaven." (Bereishis 28:17)

True, G-d could have simply told him that, and everything else for that matter, as He does often. However, much of the time it is not only WHAT we come to know, but HOW we come to learn it. For, a person relates to knowledge on a much deeper level when it is gained through experience-the more stimulating the experience, the deeper the connection is to the knowledge.

Unlike computers, human beings are also about awareness; awareness is what connects us to the source of information. For a computer, the wiring just has to be okay, and then the technical flow of information can begin and continue with a certain amount of perfection. Whatever flows to the memory chip will enter and remain accessible as long as the computer functions.

For human beings, a teacher can stand at the front of a class and yell out information, and even though the student hears him, he can still day dream and not absorb the knowledge. Or, we can read books, our eyes scanning the material as usual, and yet not take it in because our minds are locked on some other more pressing matter.

Simply put, the more we are involved in the learning process, and the more of us that is involved, the more we connect to the knowledge and the greater the chance that it will become one with us. That's why the best teachers are the ones who can make learning an experience in the full sense of the term, especially when it comes to the education of young ones, the future leaders of mankind.

Ever since the beginning of Creation, and who knows how much earlier than that, there was meant to be a Yisroel. Yisroel is a concept that existed long before Ya'akov Avinu was even born, but he was born to become the human embodiment of that concept, and his life's experiences were a Divinely-tailored path to bring him to that level of human perfection.

When the angel changed Ya'akov's name to Yisroel, and G-d later confirmed that change at Beit El, it wasn't only because he "fought with an angel and with man and prevailed"; it was an evaluation of Ya'akov's entire life's journey, the climax of a ninety-nine year journey that began when Ya'akov moved in the direction of the Bais Midrash while still in his mother's womb, and ended when he survived the incident in Shechem, like when Avraham was ready to slaughter his son and had to be stopped by the angel.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

G-d said, "Adam has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. Now he might stretch out his hand and also take from the Tree of Life and eat, and live forever." (Bereishis 3:22)

If only Adam HaRishon had waited three hours before eating from the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah. Had he waited, history and its suffering would have been completely unnecessary, and we would have been born into Gan Aiden instead of this spiritually limited level of reality.

And, lest one think that waiting three hours before eating from the Aitz HaDa'as was a small tikun for the world, we have spent the last 5,766 years making amends, and we're still not there yet.

Likewise, the incredible transformation of Ya'akov to Yisroel occurred in just over two parshios-for Ya'akov. However, it was a transformation meant not only for our great ancestor, but for everyone of his descendants as well until the end of history, when the process will be complete for every remaining Jew. And, every experience we undergo on both a personal and national level will have occurred only for this reason, no matter how serendipitous it may appear to us.

The Torah and the history books do not portray Jewish history in this matter. Rather, it is presented as if all that matters is being "good," and then we are told and bear witness to what happens to those who are not. The element of national journey is more-or-less left out, as if it is unimportant and perhaps, only relevant to some of the Jewish people.

In this approach, events such as the Crusades and even the Holocaust are just terrible examples of what happens to Klal Yisroel when Creation goes astray. But, if Jewish history has always been about the journey, then, as the Midrash implies in many places, as hard as it is to see and emotionally accept, even something like the Holocaust was destined to occur as part of the building Ya'akov into

Yisroel.

How? Why? These are questions that will only be fully understood in Yemos HaMoshiach and onward. I say fully understood because even now they can be partially understood by seeing the positive results that have occurred as a result. Coined phrases such as "the State of Israel was built upon the ashes of the Holocaust" are not random statements, but perceptions given to mankind as a result of the planning of Heaven.

Not that any of us would have sacrificed six million Jews just to gain the permission of the world to return the land of Israel back into the hands of the Jews. Not that any of us can fathom the equation that lead to the cause-and-effect relationship in the first place. We only know that the correlation exists, because one led directly to the other as a matter of historical fact.

Thus, we might have had Eisav to thank for forcing Ya'akov to flee from home and in the direction of the ultimate state of being a Yisroel. And Lavan as well, except that both of them contributed unwittingly and certainly would not have "helped out" had they known what their evil actions would lead to. Instead, we only have G-d to thank for using the two of them to "guide" our ancestor on the way while he laid the spiritual tracks that we must travel even in our own time towards personal and national fulfillment.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Ya'akov left Be'er Sheba in the direction of Charan. He arrived and slept there (Mount Moriah) because the sun had set. He took some stones from there, put them around his head, and lay down over there. (Bereishis 28:10- 11)

We take for granted that Eretz Yisroel is called Eretz Yisroel. We've been using that name for so long now that it sounds to us as meaningful as America, or England. But what if America was really called the "Land of Washington," or "Jefferson," or after any of the founding fathers of America? The name of the largest remaining super power today would have a whole different meaning.

In a sense, Ya'akov was the "founding father" of Israel, and thus the land was named for him. It is not called "Eretz Avraham," or "Eretz Yitzchak," or even "Eretz Avos," at least not in any official way. It is called the "Land of Yisroel," a.k.a. Ya'akov Avinu, and the question is, why.

The answer is, there seems to be a special relationship between the third and final Forefather and the land itself. In fact, as Chazal point out, his lying down to sleep on Har HaBayis was not incidental, but an integral part of his personal journey to becoming Yisroel, for he was brought back there miraculously, and the sun was made to set early to compel him to stay the night there.

In fact, one might ask, what is the reason for the borders of Eretz Yisroel, seeing that they are somewhat complicated. The Arizal explains that the borders of Eretz Yisroel resemble, of all things, a man lying down, and that the sulam-the ladder-is not as it appears to be:

... Know that the "Ladder" is not physical, rather it is atmospheric. It encompasses all of Eretz Yisroel, protecting it and preventing the expansion of the Klipos into the Land. The width of this Ladder is four cubits (about six feet) and its height is five hundred years. This Ladder has many levels ascending from the earth up to the sky. Some of these levels are internal while others are external. Anyone departing Eretz Yisroel, as long as he hasn't gone farther than four cubits past the border is considered as if he hasn't left at all. For, while he is within those four cubits he is considered to be in the midst of the Ladder. Similarly, anyone who is entering Eretz Yisroel, and hasn't entered more than four cubits, it is as if he has not yet entered Eretz Yisroel. (Tuv HaAretz, p. 82)

A man lying down? A ladder that is really a border?

What really happened that fateful night that Ya'akov Avinu, pursued by his angry twin brother, after spending fourteen years at the yeshivah of Shem and Eiver, camped out on top of the holiest place in the world? It seems that as Ya'akov Avinu himself lay to sleep, perchance to dream, a certain spiritual bond was created between him and the land upon which he lay, between him, and his descendants to come after him. It is as if the spiritual borders of a Jew is intimately united with the spiritual AND physical borders of Eretz Yisroel, and that somehow, the journey along the path to Yisroel is synonymous with the return home to the land itself.

That's why the Angel of Eisav confronted Ya'akov at the border of Eretz Yisroel. It was kind of a final stand, a last ditch effort on the angel's part to keep Yisroel the man and Yisroel the land away from each other. It was a tough battle, lasting the entire night, and according to the Midrash, the entire exile of which we are still a part. And, lo and behold, the Ya'akov we represent is still doing battle as the Sar shel Eisav still uses every device he can too keep Jews away from the land.

Some he has assimilated into Western culture and they have no drive whatsoever to live in Eretz Yisroel. Some he has made afraid, and some he has convinced that other mitzvos are more pressing. In the end, we'll have the last laugh at his expense, but in the meantime, to quote a popular Israel phrase that has come to mean so much: chaval al ha zman.

Have a great Shabbos,
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Text

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