

SIMPLE BUT UNBREAKABLE FAITH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This weeks "Perceptions" is dedicated in memory of Aaron ben Moshe, z"l. May it add to his merit as he ascends from level to level.

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Ya'akov left Be'er Sheva in the direction of Charan. (Bereishit 28:10)

As Rashi explains, when a tzaddik leaves a place, it leaves a gap. While he is there, his presence seems to elevate the entire community, so when he leaves there is a letdown, so how much more so when a tzaddik leaves this world.

Tonight is Motzei Shabbat, Parashat Chaye Sarah. Normally I would have started working on Parashat Toldot at this time, but since I have to travel this week I did that last week. So, to make it easier for myself while I have to travel, I am trying to get ahead and write Vayaitzai already.

I basically got as far as writing the title of the page when I remembered that I had to pay a shivah call to a prominent member of our community who lost his father last week. He had sat the entire week in Jerusalem, and was sitting his last night in Telzstone, so it was my opportunity to pay my respects to a man whom I respect very much.

The walk from my house to his takes about 5 minutes, and as I made my way over to his house, I thought to myself, "What will I write about this week?" Not feeling very inspired, I decided to wait and see what will happen over the next week, or while traveling that might be the basis of this parshah sheet. I didn't have to wait very long.

When I arrived, there were several men there, and my friend was already in the middle of a story about his father. My friend is a successful, well- refined individual and a model of many aspects of Torah Judaism. I had always assumed that his family was one of these American families that probably avoided the Holocaust and had the chance to raise their children in relative peace. He didn't show, to me at least, any signs of being a child of a Holocaust survivor, which is exactly what his mother was.

As my friend told stories totally contrary to my assumptions, I sat spell- bound for a half-hour, and

could have listened longer had other people not come in necessitating my making room for the newcomers. By the time I left, I was not the same person I was when I arrived.

It is not for me to go into the personal details that my friend told us, but the main point of all his story-telling was to relay the extent to which his father gave his life over to others. And, I mean gave over. The devotion with which he took care of his wife, who survived the gas chambers only because it happened to malfunction. That was only one occasion on which she faced death and survived it, together with her mother and sister.

And he took care of his own parents until their passing with tremendous devotion as well, and a few years after they died, his mother-in-law (the survivor) too. And, as if that wasn't enough, he somehow earned a living, never stealing a second of time from his employer, and still found sufficient time to raise his family and give them complete educations, while supporting a new local yeshivah at the same time.

And that is all I came away with in the half-hour I was there. The man lived a long, probably very tiring life, but never complained because as far as he was concerned, he existed to take care of others. "If someone had to go to the airport, my father took him," my friend said of his father. "The math was simple for him. You need to go to the airport, I have a car; Let's go. It never occurred to him that maybe it was more trouble than people expected of him, or he could afford at the moment."

As I looked at my friend in his low chair, and listened to him tell the stories with controlled emotion, I thought to myself, "What kind of children could come from a house like that?" My friend was living proof of that answer, and it was very impressive. And as I thought about all he said, I kept hearing the word "superman" in my mind. This man, and others like him from his generation, were the real super-people, careful to do great acts of chesed and to self-sacrifice for another as a matter of life that left me breathless just thinking about them in my mind.

And, like Ya'akov Avinu before him, he left. Gone. And, like Ya'akov Avinu, this righteous man left a gap in the world he left behind.

SHABBAT DAY:

Pharaoh said, "How old are you?" Ya'akov said to Pharaoh, "I've wandered for 130 years. Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life, which has not yet reached the years of my fathers in the days of their sojourning." (Bereishit 47:9)

My friend was with his father until the last moment in the hospital. At one point, his father pointed upwards three times, so he and his nephew quickly adjusted the oxygen mask. Then his father pointed upward three times again, so they pulled him up in his bed, thinking that the father was uncomfortable in his position in the bed. But he pointed upward again, and the nurse said that if they raised him any higher he would slide off the bed.

"I don't think he means that," the nephew told my friend.

One half-hour before his death, my friend's father knew he was going. So, he told my friend, his son, to leave the room. He did not want his son in the room at his moment of passing, which he felt was imminent. It was too emotional for him. He loved his children too much.

My friend got as far as the door when he had to turn around again. After so many years of self-sacrifice and hardship without a complaint, my friend's father was released from his body and free to ascend Heavenward to receive reward beyond anything that any of us could ever imagine. But, I am sure that there is quite a large Heavenly welcoming committee assembled to receive him where he was going.

I thought to myself, "That is a reward for living such a life of mesirat Nefesh (self-sacrifice): control of life until the last minute." How many people get to know their moment of passing? How many people are able to pass peacefully, consciously from this world to the next, to tell the son one moment to turn away, and to leave precisely at that moment? What a zechut!

Not too many people leave until 120 years of age these days, and few die precisely on their birthday like tzaddikim of the past did. But, I think that this type of death is on such a level, kind of a sign of Divine approval for a life well-spent. It reminded me of the gemora that warns us to return our souls back to G-d in the condition that we received them, and it sounded to me as if my friend's father did exactly that.

As I walked home, I thought about the type of mentality of the people in that generation, and how different we are from them. No doubt there are those from my generation carrying on the self-sacrifice of earlier generations, but it is less "natural" today. In the past, they used Torah to justify going out on a limb for others. Today, I often hear people (including myself) using Torah to justify why we can't go out on a limb for others.

I found myself wishing for the type of spiritual capacity of earlier generations. I pray that G-d shouldn't test me, but my grandmother used to pray, "G-d, if You have to test me, please give me the strength to pass them." She suffered pogroms in Russia and saw things happen to relatives we should never have to know about, but you'd never know it from the way she behaved in her latter years. After all that, years later in Canada, she suffered stomach cancer and was given a depressing prognosis, but she still radiated warmth and trust in G-d. As far as I knew, she never questioned G-d or His plan.

We were close, emotionally. But spiritually-speaking, she was leagues above me when it came to a simple but unshakeable faith in the Master of the Universe.

SEUDAT SHLISHIT:

The boys grew up. Eisav became a cunning hunter, a man of the field. Ya'akov was a simple person who dwelled in tents. (Bereishit 25:27)

Ya'akov was a tzaddik. He was only concerned about spiritual matters and using his energy to serve

G-d. If he had to do so in poverty, he would have gladly done it. He did not expect much and demanded even less. Had no one paid attention to him except G-d, it would have been enough for Ya'akov Avinu, perhaps even ideal since it freed him from everyday distractions from his devotion to the will of G-d.

However, that same G-d seemed to have felt differently, and literally yanked him out of a tranquil and spiritually safe environment and threw him into a pond of sharks. First there was Eisav who wanted to kill him, then there was Eliphaz who robbed him blind, and finally there was Lavan who was the antithesis of all that Ya'akov stood for: absolute truth.

For 36 years Ya'akov Avinu was a man on the run. While Eisav his brother lived in comfort, abusing the world everywhere he went, Ya'akov was forced to live away from the comfort and security of home, AND yet he remained righteous in spite of all the circumstances he had to confront. He never complained once, except to Pharaoh much later on, in order to justify how he acquired his grey hair.

In short, Ya'akov Avinu suffered tremendous hardship while never allowing it to damage his faith in G-d. He maintained the kind of relationship with G-d that most of us might only have had if we won a multi-million dollar lottery - twice over. Basically, he had for G-d what the Mishnah calls "unconditional love". For Ya'akov, the math was easy: you love G-d, period, nothing to talk about. Circumstances have nothing to do with it. He can bless you with tremendous success, or He can send you tremendous disaster; either way, you have to love Him fully at all times, and trust that it is out of His love for us that He does what He does.

It seems that my friend's grandfather had that kind of love for G-d; and I know my grandmother did, and that many of her generation did as well. The part that keeps me thinking is, how do you arrive at that level of love? How do you at least get to the point that when things get bumpy you don't feel abandoned by G-d, and therefore don't feel like abandoning Him, on ANY level whatsoever? That is what this week's parshah is about: unconditional love of G-d, and we learn it best from Ya'akov Avinu. The truth is that, I didn't understand how, until I heard my friend speak tonight.

"He had no personal desire," my friend repeated several times in a row. "He didn't want anything in particular for himself. He was there to help others, and that is what he did."

And that was Ya'akov Avinu. Ya'akov Avinu had no personal agenda, except to fulfill G-d's agenda. Whatever he took for himself he did so because that is what G-d wanted him to have in order to help bring Creation closer to fulfillment. That is why, even though Rachel was a great shidduch by anyone's standard, she only mattered to him inasmuch as she was sent to him for the sake of building Klal Yisroel, something he strongly believed G-d was as committed to do through him.

Personal agendas always result in conditional love. They say, "As long as we're on the same wavelength, we can get along. But interfere with my goals, and you become a source of my frustration." But, if our agenda is always that of G-d's, then no matter what the obstacle, since G-d sent it, it must be for the good, for OUR good, though we may have no clue how at the time.

In this week's parshah, Ya'akov surely had reason to question the good of what he was going through. But he didn't. Instead, he took everything one step at a time, and used each challenge as a stepping stone toward G-d, and not away from Him. It may have cost him much along the way, but the reward far outweighed the loss: he became the father of the Jewish people.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Nefesh HaChaim, Chapter 11

This is why the angels, who praise HaKadosh Baruch Hu with their three- fold "Kedushah" in the Name of the Most High, do so only after we have done so below [which we say in the repetition of the Shemonah Esrai], even though their Kedushah is on a higher level than ours. It is not to show honor to Yisroel, as they lack the ability to open their mouths in praise of their Creator until the sound of our Kedushah reaches them.

The whole concept of saying Kedushah is to elevate the worlds and to unify a lower world with the one above it, to increase its holiness and splendor of light, as it says in Heichelot d'Pikudei:

These on the right [side in Heaven] sing shirah, and their will is elevated as they say, "Holy!" and these on the left [side] sing shirah, and their will is elevated as they say, "Blessed!" Then they unify in holiness, those who know how to praise their Master ... All of them become unified into a whole, becoming connected to each other, after which they unify with that which is above them. (Heichelah Tinyana 147b)

Also see the Pri Aitz Chaim throughout Chapter Three, from the section dealing with the Repetition of the Shemonah Esrai, where it explains that the point of saying Kedushah is to elevate and unify the upper worlds, by increasing their holiness and light from above. (Perhaps this is the reason for the tradition among the Jewish people to elevate oneself on our toes during the actual recitation of Kedushah.)

Hence, the angels cannot open their mouths in praise on their own, and therefore they must wait until the breath of the mouths of the Jewish people gathered below them ascends. Thus, if the Jewish people throughout the world did not say Kedushah, G-d forbid, the angels too would be forced to remain silent from saying Kedushah. (See the Zohar, Parashat Balak, 190b.)

This is what the prophet said, "When they stood, they let down their wings" (Yechezkel 1:24). In other words, when Israel below remains silent, the wings of the assembly of angels above droop as a matter of course, since the wings of the angels are used for the saying of Kedushah, as the rabbis taught:

One verse says... Which wings were reduced? Rav Chiya said in the name of Rav: Those used for saying praise. (Chagigah 13b)

See the Zohar Chadash, Bereishit 13b, on "Kol HaMulah" (Yechezkel 1:24), where "their wings" is

understood along the lines of the word "assembly."

The assembled hosts above are divided into pairs. The Serafim say, "Holy!" (as mentioned in Heichalot d'Bereishit u'Pekudei, Heichelah Tinyana 42a, as well as 147a), as it says, "The Serafim stood above him... And they called to each other, 'Holy!' " (Yeshayahu 6:2). The second pair that stands opposite them that says, "Blessed," is the Ophanim and Chayot, as the rabbis taught: Which ones say "Blessed"? The Ophanim (Chullin 91a). This is also the way the Men of the Great Assembly set it up in the Kedushah of the blessing before the Shema. Each pair praises based upon its origin and root in the Worlds.

However, the Jewish people gather below say both praises, "Holy" and "Blessed!" since they incorporate all the origins and sources in one. This is the underlying idea of what the rabbis taught concerning Perek Shirah: All who say a chapter of Shirah each day..." This is because, when a person who incorporates all the forces says Shirah, they make it possible for the angels and heads of all these beings to say their praises. This, in turn, causes an emanation to everything below.

Investigate this further in Likutei HaTorah, in the section regarding the reasons for the Mitzvot, in Parashat VaEtchanan.

[The point here is that as holy as the angels are, they are still limited compared to the impact man can have on Creation. This is because as lowly as man seems to be, his soul spans all levels of Creation, whereas the angels can only span the level on which they find themselves. Furthermore, G-d has set up Creation in such a way that they are dependent upon the actions of man before they act. They know how to praise G-d, and exist to do so, but they cannot do so until man does so below.]

*Have a great Shabbat,
PW*

Text

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