

GOD IS ALWAYS CLOSE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Ya'acov settled in the land of his father, in the land of Canaan (Bereishis 37:1)

Recently, I have begun to video tape some shiurim in my own home for uploading to Kosher Tube. This is easier said than done, though, because for the last nine months, they have been renovating the three upstairs homes of our 6-home apartment building. This has meant plenty of aggravating, daytime noise, as in jackhammers, big drills, etc.

Being that we are all attached to one another with a lot of metal reinforcing bars, fantastic conductors of sound, half the time it sounds as if they are working in my own home, even though they may be working three floors up. Sometimes I even expect to see the jackhammer break through my ceiling. At the very least, it is a great inconvenience, but at the very most, it can push you to emotional extremes!

However, lately, thank God, things have quieted down somewhat. There is still noise, but not like in the early months when it was continuous. Now it is more sporadic, so it can be quiet for hours at a time, and then get noisy all of a sudden. Or it can be quiet for an entire day, or noisy for an entire day. There is no way to know the schedule without being on the construction site itself, and therefore, what happens on any particular day of taping seems more a function of direct Divine Providence than anything else.

However, one sure-fire way to bring on the noise, it has seemed, is to start taping a shiur. I don't think that they spy on me (maybe they have drilled a small peep hole in the ceiling), but somehow someone knows when to turn on the drill or jackhammer, just after I start the taping. Some times it stops for a bit, and we do an entire section again, and sometimes it just keeps going, forcing me to pack up the camera for the day until another quieter time.

We call that the Sitra Achra at work. He's the angel charged with the job of making our lives more difficult than we care for them to be, at least when trying to accomplish something spiritual. When it comes to materialism, it only bothers him if we succeed if somehow that success will help us serve God better. But, if it will interfere with our relationship with God, then he gets all polite and even holds the door open for us, so-to-speak.

He's such a troublemaker! Well, actually, he is a lot more than that, something more along the lines of a saboteur or terrorist, looking to do whatever he can to make our spiritual lives, at the least, a

challenge, and at the most, a complete disaster, because that is, in essence, his job. He was created and remains in the Divine payroll to make sure that when we do mitzvos, we do them with gusto and the proper intention, since that is the only way around the obstacles that he places along our mitzvah-fulfilling path.

Sometimes, he will just interfere with the mitzvah itself by making the conditions of fulfillment basically impossible. Sometimes he'll do it by making the performance of some mitzvos so easy that we won't notice that there are other more important ones to do. Either way, the only way to win against him is with devotion to God and His will, with a will to spiritually succeed, and most important of all, by invoking Heavenly help (Kiddushin 30b).

So, as I sit there listening to the ratatatating of the jackhammer or large drill, or whatever other menacing noisy construction devices they have in their annoying repertoire, having lost my train of thought and the opportunity to tape a shiur, I become frustrated. Far from being a tzaddik, I still expect a little Heavenly help when it comes to trying to spread Torah. "Can't God get those guys to take a long break or something, or shut off their electricity for an hour or two?" a little voice kvetches inside of me.

Not today, apparently. Today the jackhammers rule, in spite of the fact that they are merely making someone's home a little more comfortable, and I am trying to bring Torah to thousands of viewers. They may be able to keep going at what they are doing, but I will have to go and do something else, probably with ear plugs, and tape the shiur another time. Isn't that just life in this world?

Yes it is, as we are reminded in this week's parshah. For, it says:

Ya'acov settled in the land of his father, in the land of Canaan. (Bereishis 37:1)

Yaakov sought to dwell in tranquility, so the troubles of Yosef sprang upon him. The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, "It is not enough for righteous people to have tranquility in the next world that they want it in this world as well?" (Rashi)

Well, yeah. I mean, at least while learning Torah and performing the mitzvos. And why not? Isn't that the way Ya'akov's life began, until he was dragged from his tent of study into the wild and deceptive world beyond, forced to live and operate amongst the ranks of some of the most despicable people in history? And, by his own mother yet!

Well, not exactly. There was nothing that Rivkah would have preferred more for her son Ya'akov than to leave him in his place of righteousness, doing righteous things. Rather, it was Divine Providence that pushed her to push her son to get involved with the plot to take the blessings from under Eisav's nose, for the safety of the future Jewish people, setting him on a 36- year roundabout course of life that must have left him hungering for the quiet days of his tent and Torah learning.

After all, he had survived Lavan, Eisav, and Shechem. Who else was left to battle? Who else threatened the future of the first real Jewish family and billions of future descendants? Hah! Little did he know that the next level of threat was not from the outside, but from the inside, from within the very family he had worked so hard to protect!

I have to admit that, until recently, I thought that to become a Yisroel it was sufficient to deal with the likes of Lavan, Eisav, Shechem, and Heavenly beings, that being a pretty tall order in and of itself. However, it turns out, dealing with such historical scoundrels on one hand, and an angel on the other, had only been warm-up for the real battle, the internal one, the one that pits brother against brother, and children against parents.

For, when you fight against scoundrels and angels, winning is winning and losing is losing. It is quite hard to be mistaken about that. But, when you fight against one of your kind, sometimes when you win you can actually lose in the end, and sometimes when you lose, you actually win after it is all said and done.

No where is this more obvious than in the story of Yosef and his brothers in this week's parshah. As planned, they kidnapped Yosef and sold him into slavery, ridding their family of their perceived threat. Not planned, however, was the way their selling of Yosef set in motion a series of events that would give him far more power over the destiny of their family and the entire Jewish people than he might have had if they had simply let him be.

For Yosef's brothers, their internecine fighting resulted in a victory, but one that was short-lived. They laughed first, but eventually, they laughed last, or not at all. And even though Yosef, in the end, didn't laugh at his brothers, he certainly could have, looking down at them from his high position of authority, as they kneeled before him in humility.

The question is, though while all this was going on and grabbing our attention, what was Ya'akov Avinu doing? How was he dealing with the crisis that was thrust upon him at retirement age? How, if at all, did he use the 22- year crisis to solidify his position as the father of the Jewish people? Not a lot of people think about that or ask that question, but it is definitely a sub-plot, if not the main one!

First of all, if you recall, the essence of being a Yisroel is "struggling with Heavenly Beings and man and prevailing," that is, seeing all that they do to us as a function of Hashgochah Pratis-Divine Providence. When events do not go our way while we are going in the opposite direction of God, it is hard to fault Him for what goes wrong in our lives. However, it is a different story when we are doing the right thing, His right thing, and outcomes go all wrong. Then it is hard not to fault God, especially since we are acting on His behalf!

Now, when it comes to raising children in the ways of Torah, everyone has "success" stories and "failure" stories. Regarding the former, we may not always ask what we did right, for sometimes we find that there are parents who are not that careful in Torah and mitzvos who end up with children who are, and parents who are scrupulous in Torah observance whose children are not.

For the latter, it is easy to ask the classic parental question, "Where did we go wrong?" And, for some, you can add to that: "Why didn't God stop my child from going down the wrong path, after we did everything we could to try and steer him down the right one?" After all, are our children not His children? Doesn't He care enough about every Jewish child to get involved in their upbringing and stop them from turning their back on His Torah?"

It could be that there are some people who do not care what happens to their children, or that they don't have such high expectations of them. But, in the Torah world, usually it is different: expectations run high, and there is greater sensitivity to failure, especially according to community standards. Therefore, the chance for disappointment is great, as is a sense of abandonment by God. And for some who have to struggle with their children, their children, tragically, very quickly cease to be the blessing they once were at birth, and in the early, innocent years.

The one priority Ya'akov had from his beginning until his end was his children, for whom he had the highest of expectations. They were going to have to live up to the highest of standards, all 12 of them. Even before he was married, at the beginning of his journey into his 36 years exile, he gathered 12 rocks upon which to sleep, and said before lying down, "If all of these stones become one, then I know that nothing bad will come out from me." He didn't know yet whom he would marry or when, and yet, he was already focused on the outcome of his children.

This is why later, after he worked seven years for Rachel, he told his future father-in-law, "Give me my wife so I can have children with her," a relatively brash way of asking for a wedding. Unless, as Chazal explain, you are Ya'akov Avinu who is so l'Shem Shemayim, all you can think about is fulfilling of the plan of God, and your role within it. For Ya'akov, asking to get married like that was as innocent as saying, "Pass me my Tefillin so I can put them on and fulfill the mitzvah of wearing them."

Hence, Lavan could trick him and maybe even kill him, but as long as the 12 Tribes were born and raised to perfection, Ya'akov Avinu could deal with that, and the Divine Providence that brought it about. Likewise, the same with Eisav, and Shechem ben Chamor as well. And, if need be, then even fighting against an angel was something that would not overpower his sense of faith and trust in God.

But the future of his children, the Shivtai Kah? Everything he was and had become was invested in the 12 sons he was destined to father, because they represented the total future of the Jewish people, and the fulfillment of the mandate of Creation. Perhaps God didn't want to save him from Lavan, Eisav, Shechem, or the angel, but from one of the 12 Tribes not turning out right? That's where God had to draw the line, since for Ya'akov Avinu, losing one of his children was like Avraham sacrificing Yitzchak at the Akeidah.

So, how did he do with his test in the end? Did Ya'akov remain Yisroel, steadfast in his faith in God, in spite of the fact that the very mission that defined him seemed to fall apart, with no sign of improvement anywhere?

The answer to that primal question comes in Parashas Vayigash. After rejoining with Yosef and the rest of his clan, and while everyone was rejoicing in the happy reunion, Ya'akov, or rather, Yisroel, recited the Shema, confirming before everyone that all that had happened, including that last and final test, was from God, and for the good.

This ought to be chizuk and direction for all of us. It is for me, as I type these words, listening once again to the noisy jackhammers and drills fighting for my attention, with seemingly, no end in sight. Where is God in all of this, as work on His Torah? Answers a true Yisroel: Right next to us, helping us to cope with our situations, even the ones we are enduring strictly for His glory. He is there with us, suffering with us, strengthening us along the way, and, most important of all, evaluating our level of faith in Him and all that He does as we persevere.

Settle down in this world? Nothing doing. This is a world for faith, for building it and being tested in it. How well we get to settle down in the next world is completely dependent upon how well we do with both tasks in this world. And, it is specifically at this time year, during Chanukah, as we light our Menorahs that we recall this, and try to integrate it into our daily consciousness.

Hence, as we light our Menorahs, we should be asking ourselves: Will our souls burst forth and shine with faith in this world, illuminating a potentially dark world, as do our Menorahs, whose oil, when ignited, reveals the Hidden Light of Creation, and illuminates the dark of night? If they do, then we ourselves become a human Ner Shel Chanukah, fulfilling not only our own potential, but that of the world as well. It's a very tall order. But an even greater spiritual opportunity.

Chanukah Samayach.

Text

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