

YAAKOV'S SOLUTION TO SUFFERING

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Ya'akov settled in the land of his father, in the Land of Canaan. (Bereishis 32:29)

By the time Ya'akov Avinu arrived at Shechem, after defeating the Angel of Eisav and peacefully parting ways with Eisav himself, he was ready to retire. He had thought at that time, and rightly so, that he had faced all that he was destined to face, which the angel seemed to have confirmed by changing his name from Ya'akov to Yisroel.

However, the fact that his name change, unlike that of Avraham and Sarah before him, did not immediately become official, may have tipped off Ya'akov that there was still more to come. Perhaps this is why, as catastrophic as the kidnapping and violation of Dinah was, Ya'akov Avinu was ready enough to deal with it that he kept his calm, for which he was duly rewarded because after Shechem, in Beit El, God Himself confirmed his new name; he officially became Yisroel.

So, if ever there was a good time for Ya'akov Avinu to retire from Forefather action, it was then. What else was there to accomplish that he had not already achieved? He had done his part, Yisroel had reasoned, and it had since become time for his sons, the 12 Tribes, to take over the mantle of leadership and complete what he had started, elevating the rest of the nation of Yisroel status.

Apparently Divine Providence did not agree. Just after Ya'akov Avinu returned to Eretz Canaan, the entire episode of Yosef was sprung upon him, and he was introduced to a worry of a different kind. Until this point, he had to worry about the welfare of his family, but he was with them to help protect them. But now he was home and settled, and Yosef was out on his own, or worse, he was dead, and Ya'akov became inconsolable.

Rashi says that this was payback for not honoring his father and mother for the entire 22 years he was living with Lavan. However, as pointed out before, the only reason why he went to Padan Aram in the first place was to honor the wishes of his mother and father, who sent him there to save him from Eisav, and to find a wife at the same time.

We answered this by saying that, had he tried to influence Eisav, perhaps Eisav would not have turned out as rotten to the core as he had, and would have been able to retain the right of the firstborn, and therefore the blessings as well. Had that been the case, Ya'akov Avinu could have stayed at home and personally honored his mother and father hand-and-foot, and his wife could have been brought to him, just as Rivkah had been brought by Eliezer to Yitzchak.

Even had Ya'akov Avinu not deserved to suffer this way, Yosef still had to go his path, independent of his father's. If that is the case, then perhaps Ya'akov suffering wasn't so much the result of anything he did wrong, but the result of what his sons had to undergo in order to take over the mantle of leadership from their father. But should the father suffer for the sins of the sons if he himself did not encourage them to go in that way?

Then why did Ya'akov Avinu suffer this way, especially assuming that he had undergone all that he had to for his own personal completion. The Talmud may answer that question when it says:

If a person finds himself suffering, he should check his actions . . . If he finds that he has not sinned, then he should make sure that he has not wasted time that could have been spent learning Torah . . . If he has not wasted any learning time, then he can assume that it is Yesurim Shel Ahavah—Suffering From Love. (Brochos 5a)

Most of us who suffer probably would not have to go back Step One. Personally, I could find several reasons why God might cause me suffering, and knowing my life as I do, the question is not really, why do I suffer when I do, but why don't I suffer more often?

Don't get me wrong, I am not looking for any additional suffering, and, in fact, I'm looking to rid myself of any suffering I already have. But, in all honesty, knowing the rules of Torah and the extent to which I live by them, I'd say that God is being very generous and patient with me, and I know a lot of people who feel the same way. When I suffer, I can find several reasons for it.

But there are people alive who can get past Level One, knowing that they serve God to the very best of their ability in all of their waking hours, which are many, since they usually do not sleep very much, anxious to serve God as many hours per day as they can. And, people like these usually value every second of life for the opportunity each one presents in terms of mitzvah performance or learning Torah, so they probably do not have to worry about their suffering being the result of bittul Torah—wasted learning time.

What is Yissurim Shel Ahavah? It is suffering that God gives to righteous people who use it in order to become more spiritually productive. These are people who will themselves work to keep pace with their Avodas Hashem—Service of God—despite debilitating pain, be it physical, psychological, or both. God gives them this suffering to draw out the righteous new levels of commitment that they themselves might not have tapped into, already having achieved personal greatness.

This had certainly been the case with Ya'akov Avinu. As Rashi pointed out back in Parashas Vayaitzai, when Ya'akov Avinu demanded his wife from Lavan in order to start having children, it wasn't because he was unrefined. Rather, Ya'akov Avinu, when it came to his service of God and his building of the Jewish nation, was all business. He was someone who did not squander spiritual opportunities, nor did he waste any time that he could spend learning on less important matters. There as nothing wasteful about Ya'akov Avinu's life.

Since his sins were not really sins, and he did not waste any learning time, he could only suffer as a function of God's love, Who only wanted to cause Ya'akov Avinu to excel in ways that he might not know about until after persevering during God's tests. The same is true about the rest of the Avos, and great people like Moshe Rabbeinu as well.

Then of course there is the suffering that the righteous do on behalf of the rest of the world that can't even handle the suffering they deserve. Ironically, as righteous people look for personal errors, of which they have few, if any at all, to explain their suffering, the average person often mistakenly assumes that he has none, and questions why God has not made his life pleasant.

Hence, instead of using their suffering to improve their service of God, they either complain, just persevere, or only just improve their service of God a little. As a result, they do not contribute enough to the process of Tikun Olam, which is accomplished primarily through the elevation of Holy Sparks, the result of learning Torah and performing mitzvos and, apparently, the prayers of the righteous.

This is why, as the Talmud says, God made Sarah, Rivkah, and Rachel barren, because He likes the prayers of the righteous. This does not mean that God simply likes how they pray; what He likes about their prayers is the way their prayers make up for what the common folk fails to accomplish, elevating sparks others should have elevated themselves.

When the Avos suffered, they didn't complain, and they certainly didn't just persevere. Instead, they understood what the endgame was all about, elevating Holy Sparks in order to rectify Creation and bring Moshiach. Unlike the rest of the world, for the Avos, it was either exile or redemption, and they used the former to achieve the latter.

If so, then why would Ya'akov Avinu even consider settling down in the first place? Wouldn't that just slow the process of Tikun Olam down in the end?

The Talmud answers that question as well. After discussing the concept of Yesurim Shel Ahavah, it then discusses cases of great rabbis who became ill, assumedly for this reason. Yet, when asked if they accept their suffering, they answered, they wanted neither the suffering nor the reward it might bring them later on, and chose miraculous recovery instead. Does that not fly in the face of what the Talmud had just taught?

No. The Talmud is stating that one does not have to go looking for suffering, and certainly not for extra suffering. Suffering is debilitating, and usually interferes with our performance of mitzvos. After all, as it says, we are supposed to serve God with joy, which is not as easy to do when one is suffering. Hence, given the opportunity to bring it to an end, one should take it.

But if all else fails, and the suffering seems to come on its own, or lingers in spite of one's best efforts, then a person has to use it to his best spiritual advantage. The average person may not have such an easy time of it, and his suffering may be to make amends for past sins, but righteous people

do exactly that. Ya'akov Avinu did, and even though he may have thought that he could best serve God without any further suffering, once he saw otherwise, he got with the program and used the situation in the most meaningful way, even if events did not turn out the way he planned.

Text

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