YESURIM (SUFFERING) IS GOOD FOR OUR SOULS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

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

Ya'akov is on the run. However, not so much away from Eisav as much as toward Lavan and the fulfillment of destiny, his and that of the future Jewish nation.

But that is not the way it felt at the time. There he was, a simple man sitting in the tents of Torah, having the time of his life while dedicating himself to the most meaningful goals a person can achieve, doing what he had been sure was the will of God. That ended the moment his mother called Ya'akov in and included him in her plan of deception to usurp the blessings from her eldest son.

True, he stayed for 14 years in the yeshivah of Shem and Eiver on his way to Padan Aram and learned studiously, but there is a difference between learning Torah when you feel no pressure to move on and when you do. It certainly does not help one's concentration to know that one's murderous brother is out to get him, and could at any moment.

And besides, he was a changed man now. The simplicity and purity with which he once learned Torah was a thing of the past, as he indicated to his wife-to-be, Rachel:

Ya'akov told Rachel that he was her father's brother. But, was he her father's brother?! He was her father's nephew! Rather, he said to her, "Marry me." She agreed but said "My father is a deceiver, and you cannot overcome him."

He answered "I am his brother in trickery." (Megillah 13b)

And so he was. Lavan did try to outsmart him by deceiving Ya'akov into marrying his eldest daughter Leah, but Ya'akov had himself covered by arranging with Rachel to use a password when consummating the marriage at night. What he hadn't counted on, though, was Rachel outsmarting him by helping her father to succeed where he himself could not: she gave Leah the password.

Talk about conspiracies!

Not only did Rachel's double-cross undermine Ya'akov's plan, it cost him an extra seven years to work for the wife he had truly wanted to marry, even after she betrayed him. To be sure, living and working with Lavan was no party, and even an extra day with him was like an eternity. Now he had to spend an 2,555 days with him, not to mention an extra six years after that just to build up his own fortune.

It must have made him long for the good old days.

To make matters worse, it is one thing to have two wives. It is another matter altogether to have two wives that do not get along with each other, even for good reasons. After a day with Lavan and his sons, deceivers and thieves, a person wants to find respite in his own home, which wasn't always so available while Rachel and Leah were building the House of Israel.

Even after surviving the 20 years with Lavan, and the competition between his wives, Ya'akov still had to confront Eisav on the way home, and then Shechem and the violation of Dinah. That only led to Shimon and Levi taking revenge against Shechem and his entire city, and a near war that would have wiped out the fledgling Jewish nation, had it not been for a last minute miracle.

Did I mention the all night fight with the Angel of Eisav along the way? Thirty-six years later, he was home, though he never got a chance to say good-bye to his mother, who died while he was still on the way home. But that was the least of his troubles, because it was not long after settling down that Yosef was kidnapped and sold into slavery. A happy reunion, at that point, was still 22 years away, but even that was accompanied by a whole new exile to one of the most spiritually decrepit nations of its time. If anyone had a right to complain, it was Ya'akov Avinu. So he did, to Pharaoh when he said:

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." (Bereishis 47:9)

and was fined by God, one year of life for every (Hebrew) word of complaint, 33 years altogether.

Some people get no breaks, which, it turns out, for some people can be the greatest break of all, as the Talmud explains:

Rabbah bar Bar Chanah said: When Rebi Eliezer became sick, his disciples entered [his house] to visit him. He said to them, "There is a fierce wrath in the world." They broke into tears, but Rebi Akiva laughed.

"Why do you laugh?" they asked him.

"Why do you cry?" he asked back.

They answered, "Shall the Scroll of the Torah lie in pain, and we not weep?" He replied, "For that very reason I rejoice. As long as I saw that my master's wine did not turn sour, nor was his flax smitten, nor his oil putrefied, nor his honey become rancid, I thought, God forbid, that he may have received all his reward in this world. However, now that I see him lying in pain, I rejoice [knowing that his reward has been saved for him in the next world]."

He [Rebi Eliezer] said to him, "Akiba, have I neglected anything of the whole Torah?"

He replied, "Master, you have taught us, 'For there is not a just man upon earth, that does good and does not sin' (Koheles 7:20)." (Sanhedrin 101a)

That was from the Talmud. However, the Midrash concurs countless times, some examples being:

A person has to show appreciation to The Holy One, Blessed is He, when he suffers, because suffering draws a person closer to The Holy One, Blessed is He. (Tanchuma, Saitzai 2)

Suffering is more valuable that sacrifices, since sacrifices involve money but suffering involves the body. (Mechilta, Yisro 10)

Suffering only comes to the Jewish people for their good and because of the love of the Jewish people. (Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu Zuta, 11)

Come and see which way brings a person to the World-to-Come: suffering. Suffering is dear to The Holy One, Blessed is He, that the Name of The Holy One, Blessed is He, is attached to one who suffers. (Shochar Tov, Tehillim 94)

Apparently, yesurim, or suffering, is the Cod Liver Oil of the spiritual realm. It tastes terrible, but it is good for you, VERY good for you. This is not to say that one should go out looking for it, and to increase the suffering he may be presently undergoing. It just means that suffering in this world is not necessarily a sign of Divine disapproval, especially, as in the case of Ya'akov Avinu, who was trying hard to be a good person, and an even better servant of God.

On the contrary, personal suffering may very well be a sign of Divine approval, something to keep in mind since it also says:

Three portions of suffering were divided amongst the Forefathers and all of their generations, the generation of Shmad (intense persecution), and the generation of Moshiach. (Shochar Tov, Tehillim 2)

The worst, I mean the best, may be yet to come. Isn't that bad, I mean, great news? It may be an easy sell to our souls, but not necessarily to our bodies, which tend to be, and rightly so, anti-suffering. But, if it has to come, we might as well learn to use to our advantage. Its period of impact is small compared to the eternal pleasure it brings us later on, in the next world.

Text

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