

PARSHAS VAYEITZEI

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

The Torah tells us that after Ya'akov Avinu took the blessings originally intended for Eisav he had to flee for his life. The Midrash tells us that Eisav was not satisfied with Ya'akov's flight into exile, nor did he wait for his father to die as originally planned before taking revenge against his brother. Rather, he dispatched his son, Elifaz, after Ya'akov to kill him along the way.

While Ya'akov stopped to bathe in a river, Elifaz caught up to his uncle. However, though his father Eisav himself was an evil murderer, Elifaz had also grown up on the lap of his grandfather Yitzchak. Therefore, Elifaz had difficulty carrying out the command of his father, and told Ya'akov so.

Ya'akov understood Elifaz's dilemma, but also wanted to save his own life. Therefore he came up with a compromise that could work for the both of them. The Talmud says that four types of people are considered as if they are dead even while alive, one of which is a poor person (Nedarim 64b). "Therefore," Ya'akov advised Elifaz, "if you completely rob me, it will be as if you killed me even though you leave me alive."

Elifaz accepted his uncle's suggestion and robbing Ya'akov blind, he then went on his way back to his father mission accomplished, more-or-less. The only question was, where was Ya'akov to go since he no longer had any clothing left in which to travel. Grateful to be alive, he had to have wondered what to do next, and cried out to God for help.

No problem though. Divine Providence took care of that as well, causing a horseman to gallop by. When he tried to cross the river he fell off his horse and drowned. Seizing the opportunity, Ya'akov took the horseman's clothes, washed them in the river, and then put them on, probably planning to pay for them later if the opportunity arose.

The solving of one problem however only led to a potential other problem. It occurred to Ya'akov that now he might be suspected of having killed the horseman that would bring the wrath of the man's family upon him. This led him to take refuge in the Bais Midrash of Shem and Aiver where he tirelessly learned for the next 14 years. In fact, the Midrash says that for those 14 years Ya'akov never went to sleep, but rather, sleep came to him (Bereishis Rabbah 68:5).

If a person believes that history is random he would just chalk up this story to some very good luck. Ya'akov Avinu was lucky that Eisav did not pursue him on his own, and that he sent a son, who still had somewhat of a conscience, to take revenge in his place. He certainly was lucky to have a

horseman cross his path and die along his way, leaving him clothing to wear. Bizarre, but not terribly unlikely.

The fact that the events "forced" him to take refuge in the Bais Midrash of Shem and Aiver for 14 years was clearly an unfortunate and unscheduled change of plans. His parents had sent him, even commanded him to go his Uncle Besuel's home for safety and to build a family. That is exactly where he would have gone had Elifaz not taken everything he owned. Again, bizarre, but not utterly impossible.

Life, though, is far from being random. If a person does not hurt his finger if it is not first decreed by God Above (Chullin 7b), then certainly the lives of our Forefathers were Divinely orchestrated.

God arranged for Eisav to be the firstborn.

God arranged for Ya'akov to take it from him.

God arranged for Yitzchak to try and bless Eisav.

God arranged for Ya'akov to take the blessings as well from him.

And God arranged for Eisav to hate Ya'akov and plan to murder him, forcing him in to exile, and for Elifaz to track him down and steal all of his possessions. He then arranged for the horseman to die before Ya'akov and provide him with clothing, and a reason to fear the revenge of the dead man's family. Therefore, it was God Who, through all of these circumstances, forced Ya'akov into the tents of Torah study once again, this time for 14 years.

The question is, why?

As mentioned last week, Ya'akov's initial learning in the tents of Torah study prepared him for the corrupt world he was destined to face. It gave him a solid core of honesty and integrity to remain spiritually intact when having to confront the likes of Eisav.

However, that had been in Eretz Yisroel where the holiness of the land itself supported Ya'akov's spiritual growth even when dealing with the corrupt world beyond his place of spiritual sanctuary. As the Talmud says:

It is better to live in Eretz Yisroel in a city that is mostly gentile than to live in a city in the Diaspora that is mostly Jewish. (Kesuvos 110b)

The Talmud goes on to say that anyone who lives in the Diaspora is like someone who has no God. Quite simply, Divine Providence is less obvious there and it is easier to fall into the trap of believing that nature is the dominant force in a person's life. How much more so will this be the case when living with someone like Lavan who gives the impression that God is not involved in history at all.

Secondly, living amongst corrupt people takes little out of a person if he himself is already corrupt. If a person, however, has to deal with corrupt people while trying to maintain his own integrity, it is

bound to wear him away. This is especially so over the course of a couple of decades. Even someone like Ya'akov Avinu whose core trait was truth and integrity would have to have expended a lot of spiritual energy to remain spiritually intact after living and working with the devious Lavan.

This was not something Ya'akov Avinu necessarily knew on his way out of Eretz Yisroel to Padan Aram. He may have thought that he had already survived Eisav, and now he would simply have to learn how to survive Lavan as well. He didn't even know about Shechem yet.

Furthermore, he had been commanded to go to Padan Aram by his parents, a mitzvah of Kibud Av, of honoring one's parents. Even if he had wanted to go and learn for 14 years he probably would not have allowed himself to since he had another mitzvah to fulfill in the meantime. He was already 63 years of age and had yet to get married, the first step towards building the 12 tribes.

The circumstances God created literally pushed Ya'akov Avinu into the Bais Midrash as a final preparation for his journey into the Diaspora and the world of his Uncle Lavan. It would fortify Ya'akov against all the challenges that he would face over the next 36 years. It may not have been obvious to him in the beginning but it had to have been obvious to him in the end.

This, of course, is not only true about the life and challenges of Ya'akov Avinu, but about everyone. It would make life easier if God revealed to us what He is thinking and what He plans for us, but He doesn't. So instead we go about charting a course for our lives that we hope will do us justice and make us feel we're on the right track in life.

However, as we try to turn right, so-to- speak, life often makes us turn left, or vice-versa. We make all kinds of plans for our lives, but sometimes it seems as if life is working against us, preventing us from achieving the goals we have set out to accomplish. So often this just results in a lot of disappointment and frustration, and for some, anger at God.

The problem is only exacerbated when we see other people achieving what we want for ourselves, and often with less effort. If they can achieve such goals, why can't we? Why is God on their side more than He is on our side?

Ya'akov Avinu could have asked similar questions. He could have questioned God by saying, "Did I get into this problem because of a choice I personally made? It was my mother who insisted I take the blessings through deceit from my father and brother, who now chases me away from the home I love. I left for Padan Aram on the order of my parents, and Elifaz stole everything I had. You sent a horseman to replace my clothing, but that only forced me into hiding for 14 years, delaying my mission to get married. What's going on here?"

Ya'akov Avinu, of course, asked no such questions. He understood that everything that happened to him was Divine Providence, was for his ultimate good, and part of world rectification. He lived according to the philosophy that you plan your life the best you can to be in step with God's master plan, and hope that your idea of a good life is consistent with His. If events do not occur as planned,

then you have to trust that it is because God is "tweaking" your life, and maybe world history in general.

For example, the lives of the families impacted by the massacre in Har Nof last week were dramatically changed. A sudden death is always difficult to cope with, but even more so when it occurs in an unnatural manner, and how much more so when it is the result of extreme evil. Such events are a major Divine tweaking of personal lives.

There were also the people who were indirectly affected. Friends of the families have to cope with the losses as well, because it is painful to see people we care about suffer. To the extent that a person feels the pain of their family members or friends is the extent to which their lives have been altered by Heaven as well.

Even people who did not know any of the families involved in the attack were affected. For example, there were people who had planned weddings months ago, if not longer, and who experienced increased anticipation with each passing day as they approached what is traditionally one of the happiest days of a person's life. Weddings still took place the night of the attack and the days that followed, but the mood was far more sombre than had been planned.

The important thing, we learn from Ya'akov Avinu, is that the answer to questions such as, "Why me?" or "Why now?" can take years to be answered. Without prophecy it is hard to know what God is thinking until we reflect back, usually only after many years, on how certain events changed our lives for the better, even though, at the time, we thought they had accomplished just the opposite.

This is what the Talmud means when it says that a person should accustom himself or herself to say, "All that God does He does for the good" (Brochos 61a). It doesn't just state that a person should say it, but that he should "accustom" himself to say it. Why phrase it this way?

The Talmud is acknowledging how unnatural it is for people to make such a statement, especially with any sincerity, when life blows up in their faces. Rather, the Talmud is teaching, it is something that a person has to train himself to do, something that is usually the result of a deeper understanding of life, and increased mental discipline.

It also speaks about how certain great individuals, some of whom were even prophets, were able to "reduce" the 613 Mitzvos done to certain specific mitzvot, at least in principle (Makkos 23b). There are 613 commandments, but all of them can be "filed" under certain main categories.

The last person to do this, at least in the Talmud, was the prophet Chavakuk. Interestingly enough, he "reduced" all of the mitzvot, not to a single mitzvah, but to a single principle: A righteous person lives by his faith (Chavakuk 2:4). As Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein explains, this is because emunah—faith—is the basis of all good character traits. Without such character traits a person is not really living.

As the Talmud says, righteous people, even after they are dead, are still called alive, because their

good deeds continue on for them after they have physically died. Evil people, on the other hand, even while they are still living are like the dead. They do not accomplish anything meaningful in life, and usually just the opposite, which is even worse than being dead.

So yes, history can be pushy, even very pushy, and even that can be a gross understatement at times given Jewish history. However, life is about living, even, as the Talmud states, after a person is no longer alive. This takes emunah, faith in God, faith in the Director of history, in the Master Orchestrator of life and living. In the end, good will triumph, and in the most glorious of ways possible. We just may not see how until after a few "sequels."

On another note I am publishing a new book, b"H, called "Deeper Perceptions," also on the weekly parshah. We have 200 copies that we want to send for free to synagogues or educational centers around the world. We just need addresses to send to which we can send them.

If you would like a copy sent to your local synagogue or Torah educational center send us the address at addresses@thirtysix.org. Unless you tell us otherwise, we'll even mention that the suggestion to send the book came from you. Thank you in advance.

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