

ERETZ YISROEL AND THE DIASPORA, PART 2

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

He commanded them, saying, "So shall you say to my master to Eisav . . . 'I have delayed until now'." (Bereishis 32:5)

We left off last week with a question. The Talmud wanted to learn that learning Torah is greater than fulfilling the mitzvah of honoring one's father and mother. The proof: Yosef was absent from home for 22 years as punishment for Ya'akov's being away from home for the same amount of time.

The problem with this pshat is that Ya'akov only left Eretz Yisroel in fulfillment of the mitzvah of Kibud Av v'Aim. His parents had sent him. Why would Ya'akov be penalized for this, and how can it be proof of the Bavli's assertion?

The Chizkuni provided one explanation, but this led to other questions. This is a different explanation, and it raises questions of its own. One such question is, why was Ya'akov Avinu forced to "steal" the blessings in the first place, which resulted in his exile? Ya'akov may have been following his mother's orders, but this led to the Hashgochah Pratis that necessitated such an approach to the future of the Jewish people?

Root Problem

It seemed like the most obvious thing to do. As the firstborn son of Yitzchak, Eisav was destined to be the future leader of the Jewish people. Just as there was destined to be four mothers, there was supposed to have been four fathers. There would have been, had Eisav not completely deviated from the path of Torah.

It was hard not to notice who Eisav had become, even for Ya'akov Avinu who buried himself in Torah learning in the Bais Midrash. Therefore, when the opportunity presented itself to take the right of the firstborn away from Eisav, Ya'akov did not hesitate and bought it for a pot full of lentils.

It was a clever move on Ya'akov Avinu's part, but perhaps the source of all his problems. It set in motion a religious struggle that continues until this very day, one that can be translated into a fight for the right of the firstborn. Whether talking about the Crusades of the past or Jihad of the present, the war against the Jews is a war about who is the true firstborn of God.

What, if anything, should Ya'akov Avinu have done instead? Outreach? Was Eisav even open to any kind of positive spiritual change? Hardly. Ya'akov Avinu clearly took what seemed to have been the most expeditious route to becoming the people of God, and should certainly not have been

penalized for that.

Then again, the Talmud, quite remarkably, says:

Rav Acha b'Rebi Chanina said: "Never did a favorable word go forth from the mouth of The Holy One, Blessed is He, of which He retracted for evil, except for this. It is written, 'God said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a [letter] Tav upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that are done in its midst, etc." ' (Yechezkel 9:4). The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to Gavriel, 'Go and put a Tav of ink upon the foreheads of the righteous, so the destroying angels won't have power over them, and a Tav of blood upon the foreheads of the wicked, so the destroying angels may have power over them.'

The Attribute of Justice said before The Holy One, Blessed is He, 'Master of the Universe! How are these different from those?'

'They are completely righteous people, and the others are completely wicked,' He answered.

'Master of the Universe!' it continued, 'they had the power to protest but did not.'

'It is well known that had they protested they would not have listened to them.'

'Master of the Universe!' it said, 'This may have been revealed to You, but was it revealed to them?'

Thus it says, '[Completely kill] the old man, the young and the maiden, and little children and women. But do not go near any man upon whom is the mark, and begin at My Sanctuary. Then they began with the elders which were before the house' (Yechezkel 9:6)." (Shabbos 55a)

According to this, outreach does not begin only where there seems to be a chance of success to bring people closer to God. It simply begins because someone is NOT close to God. That is the mitzvah incumbent upon all those who know better. Success in any endeavor, the Talmud states, is totally in the hands of Heaven (Brochos 33b).

It is not clear if Ya'akov ever tried to bring Eisav back to the way of God. It could be that he bought the right of the firstborn only after all attempts at kiruv failed. It could also have been that being a person who dwelled all day in the tents of Torah study that he did not take it upon himself to mekarev his evil brother.

If it is assumed that Ya'akov did NOT try and bring Eisav back and should have, it could explain why all of his troubles began. It could be why he was forced to buy the "bechor" in the first place, setting up the need to later steal the blessings from Eisav. This led to Eisav's increased hatred of Ya'akov, forcing Ya'akov to flee his family, his home, and Eretz Yisroel to save his life.

One of the greatest acts of Kibud Av v'AEim that Ya'akov Avinu could have done would have been to at least try to mekarev his brother. Not doing this forced him into a situation in which he could not actually perform the mitzvah of Kibud Av, being in the Diaspora.

In the end, though, the correlation of Yosef's 22-year absence to Ya'akov's 22-year exile in Padan Aram would not support the Bavli's assertion of Torah learning being greater than the honoring of one's parents. The concept may be true, but Ya'akov's stay in Chutz L'Aretz would not be a proof of it.

In Summary

The discussion cannot end here. The Bavli made a statement. It cannot be wrong, per se. It can represent a different point of view, but it can't be in error. This is Chazal we are talking about.

The answer in the end may have to do less with going to Padan Aram than going to the yeshivah of Shem and Eiver. After all, did his parents send him there first? It seems as if Ya'akov went on his own. Yitzchak and Rivkah may not have been against it, but it certainly seems from the story as if their main concern had been for Ya'akov to get as far from Eisav as possible, as soon as possible.

In the yeshivah of Shem and Eiver, however, Ya'akov remained at risk the entire 14 years he stayed there. While there, he could also not fulfill the mitzvah of Kibud Av, but he was not punished for this. Thus, it can be seen from this that learning Torah is greater than the mitzvah of honoring one's parents.

If so, then why mention Ya'akov's stay in Padan Aram as punishment for not fulfilling the mitzvah of Kibud Av v'Aim? Because, it shows that even though Ya'akov Avinu could not fulfill the mitzvah because of the reality of living in the Diaspora, he was still punished for being in a situation that denied him the opportunity to do as mentioned earlier.

If Ya'akov was punished for a lack of Kibud Av in a place where he technically could not fulfill the mitzvah, then how much more so should he have been punished for the lack of mitzvah in a Land in which he could fulfill it! Why wasn't he? Because he was learning Torah, and that superseded the mitzvah of Kibud Av.

After this discussion, it may help to understand something that Rashi mentions in this week's parshah in a different, perhaps more accurate light. Rashi explains the following verse as:

He commanded them, saying, "You shall say to my master to Eisav, 'Your servant Ya'akov says, "I have sojourned—garti—with Lavan, and I have delayed until now.' " (Bereishis 32:5)

"Garti" has the numerical value of 613, to say: "I lived with the wicked Lavan, but I kept the 613 commandments, and I did not learn from his evil deeds."

What was Ya'akov intimating with this hint, especially if mitzvos did not apply in Padan Aram?

Eisav may have counted on the reality of the Diaspora with respect to mitzvah observance to have weakened Ya'akov's connection to God. He may have hoped that Ya'akov had become like him over the 22 years he was outside the Land, leveling the spiritual playing field, so-to-speak, and greatly reducing his Divine assistance.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word Ya'akov uses is "shamarti," which means "guarded." If he meant to say that he had FULFILLED the mitzvos in Chutz L'Aretz, he could have, and should have, used the word "kiyamti," which means, "I fulfilled." Why the difference?

In next week's parsha we will see the word "shamar" in a different context. After Yosef reveals his second dream to his father and brothers, his father rebukes him while his brothers become even more jealous of Yosef. Nevertheless, the verse ends by saying:

So his brothers envied him, but his father awaited—shamar—the matter. (Bereishis 37:11)

Awaited the matter: He was waiting and looking forward in expectation of when [the fulfillment] would come. (Rashi)

Based upon this explanation, perhaps Ya'akov was letting Eisav know: I may not have been able to fulfill the mitzvos while away from Eretz Yisroel, but I kept doing them while there, to "protect" them from becoming lost from me. Thus, now that I am back in Eretz Yisroel where mitzvos count, I am as proficient as I was before I left, as if I never left Eretz Yisroel. If anything, Ya'akov was telling his brother, my merit has increased since returning home.