HISTORY AJAR

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Ya'akov awoke out of his sleep and said: "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it!" (Bereishis 28:16)

YA'AKOV AVINU WAS forced to quickly leave town after taking Eisav's blessings. Eisav may have hidden his hatred from everyone around him, but the Torah tells us that he was bent on revenge. Rivka got wind of this and promptly sent Ya'akov packing to her brother Lavan in Padan Aram. He would not return home again for 36 years.

On his way out of Eretz Yisroel, Ya'akov had his famous dream of the ladder and the angels. He awoke the next morning in awe of his prophetic vision, and of the place in which he had it:

Ya'akov awoke out of his sleep and said: "Surely God is in this place and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said: "How full of awe is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Bereishis 28:16-17)

This was not something a person experienced and then just moved on. It was a VERY momentous occasion that needed to be demarcated so it could stand out in history. Therefore:

Ya'akov rose up early in the morning and took the stone that he had put under his head, and set it up for a pillar. (Bereishis 28:16-17)

Ya'akov's response to his historic prophecy? A monument. And, what does every good monument require for initiation and to make it special? The Torah tells us:

He poured oil upon the top of it. (Bereishis 28:16-17)

Exactly, oil, shemen zayis to be exact, the anointing oil of choice. Question: From where exactly did Ya'akov GET the oil? Did he track down some olive trees, pick their olives, and cold press them to make a jar of anointing oil?

He didn't have to. Apparently the oil came to him from Heaven. That's right, Heaven. It was SPECIAL oil. Heavenly oil. MIRACULOUS oil:

He used it to pour on the top stone. When it refilled itself, Ya'akov knew it was set aside for God. He said, "It's not right to leave this here." (Yalkut Reuveini, Vayishlach, 71)

So he didn't. Ya'akov took the miraculously self-replenishing jar of shemen zayis with him on his journey. And, it's the last we hear of it, or so it seems.

After spending 14 years in the yeshiva of Shem and Eiver, Ya'akov made it to his Uncle Lavan's home. Then he worked seven years to marry Rachel and got Leah instead. He had to work an additional seven years to marry Rachel. As his family grew, he spent an additional six years earning a living, after which he decided it was time to leave.

After being away for 34 years Ya'akov Avinu was finally on his way home. That's when, just outside of Eretz Yisroel, he finally met up with his brother Eisav once again. It's what happened the night before though that is even more significant:

He got up that night and took his two wives, his two handmaids, and his 11 sons and crossed the ford of the Yabok. After he took them and had them cross the stream, he sent over what was his. Ya'akov was left alone. (Bereishis 32:23- 25)

Rebi Elazar said: He remained for pachim ketanim—small jars. (Chullin 91a)

The Yabok river is a northern tributary off the Jordan River. Apparently Ya'akov and his family had to cross it in order to enter Eretz Yisroel. So, the day before his confrontation with Eisav he had to go back-and-forth in order to move his large entourage and all of his many possessions to the other side of the river.

By day's end, the job was done, save for some "pachim ketanim," some small, and seemingly insignificant jars. Consequently he found himself alone when a "stranger" happened upon him and wrestled him the rest of the night. All for some small little jars that most people, after a long day of moving, probably would have left behind.

The Talmud also makes a big deal about Ya'akov's self-sacrifice for the jars, evident by the way it was compelled to comment and say:

From here we learn that righteous people value their property more than their own bodies. (Chullin 91a)

In other words, the only significance the Talmud attaches to the small jars is that they belonged to a righteous person. They might have been worthless to the average person, but not to a tzaddik. Tzaddikim greatly value their property, even their "insignificant" possessions, and they will protect them at risk of physical harm.

The Talmud does go one step further and explains why this is the case, but it only makes the question stronger, not weaker. In the case of Ya'akov Avinu and the pachim ketanim the discussion can be avoided because the Midrash has an alternative reason for Ya'akov's mesiras Nefesh for a bunch of jars, or rather, a single jar:

From where did he get this jar? After putting the stones under his head, he found, upon awakening the next morning, a stone with a jar of oil attached to it. He poured oil on its top, and the jar refilled itself. That's when Ya'akov knew it was set aside for God, so he said, "It's not right to leave this here."

This is the oil that was used to anoint the Mishkan, all its vessels, the altar, Aharon and his sons, and all the kings, and still all of it remains, as our rabbis say, "for your generations." It is the jar of oil of the Tzerafit, to whom Eliyahu said, "nor will the jar of oil be diminished," and the oil of the wife of Ovadiah the prophet. When Ya'akov saw all the future miracles that would occur with [the jar of oil], he endangered himself [for it]. (Yalkut Reuveini, Vayishlach 71)

It may be true that righteous people value their property more than their own safety. However, Ya'akov Avinu had a far more pressing reason to return for his lost jar: its contents. It contained Heavenly oil which, according to some prophecy he had, would never outlive its usefulness.

Just how far into the future did Ya'akov Avinu see? He became aware of the Greek exile during his dream of the ladder, the third angel representing the Greek Kingdom. Did he also see how the Greeks would extinguish the Menorah, and defile all the oil in the Temple? Did he see how the Chashmonaim would mount a counterattack and miraculously retake the Temple?

Did Ya'akov's vision also include the Chashmonaim miraculously finding ONE jar of oil bearing the seal of the Kohen Gadol still intact? Was he able to see how the jar of oil, that contained only enough oil for one day, would end up burning for EIGHT days?

According to the following, he didn't have to. Apparently God told him all about it:

God said to Ya'akov, "For endangering yourself for a small jar, I Myself will repay your children with a small jar to the Chashmonaim!" (Tzeidah LaDerech)

Hmm. Ya'akov risked his life by going back for a small jar of miraculous oil. As a reward, God promised his descendants a miraculous jar of oil in the Second Temple Period.

A different one, or the SAME one?