

TITHING ALL HIS POSSESSIONS

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

It was the year 2185 after creation and Yakov was 77 years old. He had just concluded 14 years of study in the academy of his Great-grandfather Ever (Shem had died 27 years earlier in 2158) and was embarking on the remainder of his trip to Padan Aram.

As far as we know, Yakov had spent the first 77 years of his life immersed in the study of nature and the revelation of G-d's presence and intent. He was "the wholesome man dwelling in the tents of study." He was the true scholar seeking wisdom and understanding of humanities purpose in G-d's scheme of creation.

At the end of last week's Parsha Yitzchak bestowed upon Yakov the blessings of Avraham. In so doing, the mantle of responsibility for spreading "truth, justice, and the monotheistic way" was passed to Yakov. This responsibility placed upon Yakov the obligation to interact with the non-Jewish world. The position of the Jew as a teacher to the families of humanity was Yakov's new job.

How was Yakov trained for his new position? What was the focus of his first 63 years beneath the tutelage of Yitzchak his father? What extra skills and training was he seeking when he entered the academy of Ever? As it is we push our children to "get on with their education." Imagine your child has finished a degree in medicine. A minimum of 8 years post graduate work, a few more years for specialty training, and the expectation is for him to find a position and begin working. Instead, he decides to enter an-other graduate program in law. How would you respond? Yakov was 63 and he asked for another 14! Why? What more did he need to study? Torah is endless. There is no end to its study. Why didn't Yakov immediately proceed to the home of Lavan rather than enroll in the academy of Ever?

The first 77 years of Yakov's education should be divided between the 63 years that he learned with Yitzchak and the 14 that he studied beneath Ever. From Yitzchak he learned the strength and discipline of the true Maamin - believer. This was the internal training that insured both the foundation of Yakov's understanding of G-d as well as his relationship with G-d. Yitzchak and Rivkah represented security, tranquility, and isolation. Their home was an environment that protected Yakov from any other influences except the truth of G-d's reality and expectations for humanity. In the first 63 years, Yakov's fundamental belief in Hashem and commitment to doing His Mitzvos became unshakable. He was ready to leave the protection of the "tent" and assume his rightful place in society.

At the end of last week's Parsha, after the successful conclusion of Yakov's first 63 years, Yitzchak bestowed upon him the blessings of Avraham. These blessings were always supposed to be his. Yitzchak would have never bestowed upon Eisav the responsibility of revealing to the world the goodness of G-d! However, Yitzchak had to be certain that Yakov was strong enough to assume the mantle of Avraham's calling. He had to be able to interact with the non-Jewish world and remain the "the wholesome man dwelling in the tents of study."

Yitzchak instructed Yakov to leave Canaan and go to Pdan Aram to the home of Lavan. It was clear that Yitzchak expected Yakov to remain there long enough to marry and have children. (28:3) "May G-d bless you and make you a congregation of peoples." However, beyond the goal of marrying and raising the next generation of Jews Yakov was responsible for the "blessings of Avraham." His ministry would always include being a role model to the other nations and spreading the awareness of G-d. This required special training and further study.

Lavan and the people of Padan Aram were not unknown to Yitzchak and Yakov. Rivkah made sure that they knew whom Lavan was and the kind of society he represented. Yakov knew that he could withstand the general antithetical influences of society. However, he did not know if he could survive the insidious falsehood and anti-G-d determination of Lavan. Therefore, he sought out the wisdom and training of the one man who could teach him those skills. He went to the ancient Ever.

Ever understood the non-Jewish mentality better than any other person alive did at that time. For more than 400 years, he had been teaching the truths of G-d alongside his Great-great-grandfather Shem. More so, he was the protégé of Shem. Shem had died only 13 years before Yakov arrived at the academy. (Chances are that Yakov had, at some point in his first 50 years, met and studied with Shem.) Shem was the towering paradigm of survival in the face of negativity. He had been 98 at the time of the Mabul (Great Flood) and had survived the negative and anti-G-d sentiments of that generation. Shem went on to build his great academy and was eventually joined by his grandson Ever. I have no doubt that Shem gave over to Ever the skills and strengths that he had perfected under the direction of his father Noach. During the 14 years that Yakov stayed in the academy of Ever, he was trained to understand the non-Jewish world and to withstand the wickedness of the Lavans of that world. These were skills that only Ever could have taught.

At the age of 77, Yakov was ready to leave. Yakov was ready to undertake the "blessings of Avraham" and withstand Lavan's insidious intentions. Note that it was only after the 14 years at the Yeshiva of Ever that Rashi (28:10) referenced the Medresh, "The departure of a Tzadik from a location makes an impact." Already Yakov was influencing the surrounding communities. He was ready to take on Lavan and his henchman!

The next scene, which opens up our Parsha, is the famous prophecy of the ladder. Arriving at what would one day be Har Habayis - the Temple Mount, Yakov was promised G-d's benevolent protection while in exile. Upon awakening, Yakov seems to make a deal with G-d. (28:20-22) "If You

will be with me... watch over me... provide food and clothing... return me in peace... and be my G-d... then I will build the Bais Hamikdash and give 1/10th of all my possessions." First of all, the notion of "making a deal - you give me this and I will give you that" demands an explanation. Secondly, how could Yakov promise to build the Bais Hamikdash? It was not up to him! Furthermore, he did not fulfill his promise!

A study of Rashi reveals that Yakov was not making a deal. Yakov was speaking from great humility. "G-d, you have promised to care for me and protect me. You have promised that my children will inherit the land of Israel. However, that assumes that I will remain worthy of your benevolence. Therefore, if I remain worthy of your protection etc. I will do everything in my power to raise children who will eventually build a Bais Hamikdash. In so far as I am concerned, I promise to tithe all my possessions."

Yakov recognized that his success at surviving Lavan, raising a family, and fulfilling the blessings of Avraham required G-d's constant protection. His personal commitment was to do his part in accomplishing his tasks. Ever, Yitzchak, Shem, and Avraham had taught in word and deed that personal integrity and respect for every person's personal property and rights were the foundation of a moral society and world. Respect for personal property and rights' was also a statement of belief in G-d, Creator of the universe.

Yakov had been trained by Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ever that integrity, honesty, respect for individual rights and property, was the first step and most potent method for influencing the world to believe in G-d. No matter how brilliant or effective a teacher may be, without integrity everything else is less than meaningless. Everything taught becomes a perversion. The proof is that the world was destroyed because of Chamas - thievery and to this day it remains the one "sin" that we are most accused of by the rest of the world.

The Bais Hamikdash would one-day stand before the world as "the House of G-d." In that house every person, Jew and non-Jew would find meaning and value direction and support. It would be the center of the world's conscience. It would challenge the world to better understand G-d and their place in His universe. From within its walls would emanate the blessings of Avraham. Yakov promised G-d to raise a nation that would one day be worthy of building and maintaining such a House of G-d.

However, on a personal level, Yakov promised to tithe all his possessions. Tithing is the practical introduction of G-d into society. Tithing assumes that all that we have, all that each of us has, is given to us by G-d. G-d is nice enough to let us use 9/10 of what He gives us for our personal use. However, the other 1/10 must be given away, as per G-d's instructions. The foundation of a moral and ethical society is belief in a Creator who created the universe for a purpose. That purpose extends to everything that G-d created. It extends to His decision to give me what is mine and give you what is yours. Respect for that delineation is a statement of belief in the sovereignty of G-d.

Therefore, as Yakov is about to leave the protection of Eretz Yisroel and begin interacting with the non-Jewish world, Yakov promises that his personal behavior will always reflect the belief in G-d, Creator of the universe

Copyright © 2001 by Rabbi Aron Tendler and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
