

SECRETS OF SURVIVAL PART II

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

At the Burning Bush Moshe's first response was to ask G-d two questions. "Why me and why them?" He questioned G-d's selection of him as the Redeemer and he questioned the merits of the Bnai Yisroel to be saved. (3:11 Rashi) G-d answered (free translation), (3:12) "I chose you so that everyone would know that I am taking them out of Egypt (rather than you Moshe) and the merit of the Jews is their Yichus (ancestry) and the fact that I will give them the Torah."

In last week's issue I presented the three basic elements of Jewish survival: 1) Torah 2) Mesorah (transmission of G-d's word from generation to generation) 3) Eretz Yisroel (land of Israel). This week I would like to continue that discussion by revisiting Yakov's blessing to Ephraim and Menashe as well as this week's incident of the Burning Bush.

Ignoring Yoseph's insistence on Yakov placing his right hand on Menashe and his left hand on Ephrayim, Yakov refused to un-cross his hands. He explained to Yoseph that although Menashe was older Ephrayim would be greater. The placement of his right hand on the head of Ephrayim rather than the head of Menashe was deliberate and necessary. It was a statement of relative importance. True, Menashe in his capacity as a civil servant interfacing with the non-Jewish world needed greater encouragement to remain true and uncompromising in his devotion to G-d. On the other hand, Ephrayim's singular devotion to studying the word of G-d was the truest calling of a Jew. As such, placing his hand on Ephrayim's head rather than Menashe's head proclaimed the primacy of Torah study over anything else.

A note of clarification: It is not my intention to weigh in on the Kollel (full-time post-graduate study of Torah) non-Kollel discussion. Regardless of whether or not a family should study Torah to the exclusion of any other pursuit is a matter of personal choice and availability. However, on the issue of what defines us as Jews is the term "Chosen." We were chosen for one and only one reason. We were chosen to receive the Torah from G-d on Mt. Sinai. (3:12) "...When you take the people out of Egypt you will serve G-d on this mountain." No other endeavor defines us as unique among the nations; therefore, Yakov insisted on placing his right hand on the head of Ephrayim because he had chosen to devote his life to the study of Torah.

We have presented two clear instances where the Torah emphasized the primacy of Torah: 1) When Yakov blessed Menashe and Ephrayim and 2) G-d's answer to Moshe at the Burning Bush. To better understand the unique designation of the Bnai Yisroel as the "Chosen People," we must go back further in the history of Torah and the history of the Patriarchs.

G-d's commands must come directly from G-d. They cannot be the inventive genius of human intellect deciding what G-d wants humanity to do and what He does not want humanity to do. The absolutes of right and wrong, good and evil, must come directly from G-d. The moment of Matan Torah (Revelation) was and remains the single most direct presentation of G-d's will. Prior to Matan Torah His wishes were revealed to humanity through the medium of prophecy. It started with Adam and Chava and extended through the various chosen prophets such as Chanoch, Mesushelach, Lemech, Noach, Shem, Ever, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yakov (to name a few). The bottom line is that the Mesorah, the transmission of G-d's will from generation to generation was always predicated on their being a previous generation to teach the subsequent generation. No generation ever came upon G-d's commandments by the accident of human intellectual inventiveness.

Torah - the record of G-d's intention for humanity - should have been the property of all. However, as the Mishnah in Avos (5:3) states, Avraham was granted the exclusive on Torah because the rest of the world had rejected it by dint of their chosen ethics and values. Nevertheless, let us be perfectly clear that Avraham's understanding of G-d's intentions for humanity was taught to him by the earlier prophets Noach, Shem, and Ever. (On his own he realized that there must be a Creator. Knowing the Creator's intentions for humanity was taught to him by the great prophets who preceded him.)

Avraham studied in the academy of Shem and Ever. Yitzchak studied in the academy of Shem and Ever. Yakov studied in the academy of Shem and Ever. Not only did Avraham teach Yitzchak and Yakov and not only did Yitzchak teach Yakov, each of the Patriarchs also learned about G-d and His intentions from their great - great - grandfathers, Shem and Ever.

We assume that there were others besides the Avos who studied in the academy of Shem and Ever; however, Yakov was unique among them all. The Medresh records that Yakov studied from Shem and Ever as a young man and everyone knows that he attended the academy for an additional 14 years on his way to Lavan.

Yitzchak blessed Yakov and Eisav in the year 2171 when they were 63 years old. Yakov left the academy of Ever (Shem had died in 2158 at the age of 600) in the year 2185. The recorded death of Ever was in 2187 at the age of 464. These dates are determined by adding up the ages at which certain individuals died as recorded in Sefer Bereishis (book of Genesis). It is also accepted that there could be a two year margin of error depending on how close the exact date was to the end of the year.

E.g. If the birth occurred a month before the new year it could have been recorded as a full year when in reality it was only one month. If the death occurred a month into the new year it might have been recorded as a full year when in reality it was only one month. Ever may have been born right before the year 1724 and may have died at the beginning of 2187. It would have been recorded that he died at the age of 464 years when in reality he was 462. That could mean that he died two years earlier in the year 2185.

The above calculations answer the question as to why Yakov left the academy of Ever after 14 years. Why didn't he stay longer? However, if Ever died two years earlier than the recorded date (in 2185 rather than 2187) it coincides with Yakov's departure from the academy. Yakov left the academy because there was no one left to teach him. For all intents and purposes he was the greatest scholar remaining in the academy and without a teacher to teach him he could no longer justify delaying fulfilling Yitzchaks command to go to Lavan and get married.

Shem and Ever were not Jewish. Their job was to teach about G-d to anyone who desired to know. Avraham, the first Jew, extended that job into the realm of outreach. Rather than wait for students to come seeking the knowledge of G-d and truth he and Sarah went out to find students and spread the knowledge of G-d. Yitzchak and Rivkah's main focus was raising and teaching Yakov and Eisav and they continued Avraham's work in a limited capacity. Yakov's job on the other hand was to give birth to the nation and his focus would be almost exclusively devoted to raising them. Granted, his presence wherever he went made a monumental impression on all by proclaiming the truth of G-d and His intent for humanity; however, that was by example more so than direct teaching.

Yakov is called the "Chosen One" from among the Avos (Patriarchs). That designation has many meanings and applications and I would like to suggest that it relates to the essence of why we are called the "Chosen People." Just as the Chosen People reflects on the fact that we were the only nation gifted to receive the Torah, so too Yakov is called the Chosen One because with the death of Ever he became the single complete repository and protector of G-d's commandments. Basically, it means that with the death of Ever the transmitted truth and knowledge of G-d's intentions for having created humanity, the entirety of the Mesorah from Adam on down, was left to Yakov to keep, protect, and teach.

The Rambam writes that all knowledge of G-d's commandments, including the Seven Mitzvos given to the Sons of Noach, must come from the Torah as taught by the Jewish people. If a non-Jew does one or all of the Seven Mitzvos on his own without acknowledging that what it is and how it must be done comes directly from the Torah and can only be understood as taught by the Rabbis, he will not receive reward for doing a Mitzvah, a commandment. In essence he is doing what his own inventiveness dictates and not what G-d dictates.

Seventy years after leaving the academy of Ever, Yakov blessed his grandchildren Menashe and Ephrayim. The blessing focused all future generations on the reality of G-d's constant supervision and intervention. At the same time the placing of his right hand on the head of Ephrayim established the primacy of Torah as the defining criteria and endeavor of the Jewish nation, the Chosen People. Note that Ephrayim's great grandson, Yehoshua would be the only other person besides Moshe solely responsible for the entirety of the Mesorah.

192 years later Moshe met G-d at the Burning Bush on Har Sinai. Wondering by what merit the nation deserved to be saved Hashem told him, (3:12) "... When you take the people out of Egypt you will

serve G-d on this mountain."

G-d said, "Moshe, the Bnai Yisroel are the children of Yakov. Yakov, the Chosen One, was granted the awesome responsibility of bearing and protecting the entire Mesorah. It was his responsibility to pass it on to his children, the Chosen People. I trusted no one else for that job. Even the angels knew Yakov's chosenness when they saw that it was his image that I had engraved on my celestial throne. Yakov and the other Avos did their job well. Their time came and went and now it is time for Me to fulfill my promise. All of time and all of creation await this moment. Go to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let My people go. They have an encounter with destiny. It is time for them to become the bearers of the Mesorah. It is time for them become My kingdom of priests and holy nation. They have been chosen.

"Torah was commanded to us by Moshe the inheritance of the congregation of Yakov."

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