

BROTHERS IN ARMS

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

And Yaakov said to his brothers, 'Gather stones!'..." (31:46)

After spending twenty years in Charan, Yaakov flees with his family to Eretz Yisroel. Lavan pursues Yaakov with the intention of killing him^[1]. However, Hashem intervenes and warns Lavan not to harm Yaakov^[2]. When he confronts Yaakov, Lavan proposes a treaty. Among the terms of the treaty a landmark is designated on the border between Canaan and Aram which both parties agree not to cross with hostile intentions^[3]. The verse records "Yaakov said to his brothers 'Gather stones!' So they gathered stones for a mound upon which they ate a meal^[4]." The commentaries disagree as to who the "brothers" of Yaakov are and what eating upon this mound signifies. The Ramban understands that the brothers are Lavan's companions and the meal is part of the covenant, signaling mutual acceptance of the pact^[5]. However, Rashi maintains that the brothers are, in fact, Yaakov's children, and that they are referred to as "brothers" because they stand by Yaakov in battle and times of distress^[6]. The meal, therefore, signifies Yaakov staking his claim to the area past the Aramean border^[7].

The bond between children and parents is even closer than that between siblings. How does the Torah's referring to Yaakov's children as his "brothers" reflect their commitment to their father in battle? What insight into the parent-child relationship is the Torah offering?

Commensurate to the responsibility a parent expects his child to assume, is the independence which the parent must be willing to allow his child to acquire. Parents must allow their children the freedom to stand on their own. Not given this freedom, a child will perceive himself as completely subordinate in his position vis-à-vis his parents, for they have always been his caretakers and providers. Consequently, he will never be in the proper state of mind to assume the mantle of responsibility required by his parents.

Rashi is explaining that Yaakov does not call his children "brothers" because they go to battle with him, rather, to assure that they would be able to go to battle with him. A child has a greater commitment to his parent than to his sibling. However, this does not ensure that he will be more effective in performing the task required. A child who views his parents as his protectors, will be ineffective in their defense. By Yaakov giving his children a sense of equality, he brings forth from within them a new level of responsibility which would be required in dire straits.

1.Yerushalmi, Pe'ah 1:1

2.31:24
3.31:44
4.31:46
5.Ibid
6.Ibid
7.Seichel Tov

Working With Confidence

"And he said, 'Look, the day is still long...' (29:7)

This week's parsha chronicles Yaakov's ascent as Patriarch of the Jewish people in the land of Aram. In Parshas Ki Savo, we encounter the precept of "bikurim" - "the first fruit"; coupled with his gift of first fruits, a Jewish farmer is obligated to relate a short synopsis of Jewish history which begins with Yaakov's subjection to the deceitful Lavan. He declares "Arami oveid avi veyeired mitzraymah" - "An Aramean attempted to destroy my father and he (Yaakov) descended to Egypt^[1]." Why are our experiences in Aram critical to our heritage? Furthermore, why does the Torah juxtapose our Aramean experience with our descent to Egypt?

Upon Yaakov's arrival in Aram, the Torah relates a seemingly unnecessary incident concerning the Aramean practice of retiring early to water their flock. Yaakov chides them concerning their work ethic, saying "If these are not your sheep, then you are negligent in your responsibilities to your employers, and if they are yours, then you are lazy^[2]." It would appear that Yaakov is behaving rather presumptuously for a stranger in a new city. Why does the Torah deem it necessary to recount this incident?

The Torah describes Lavan as a "ramai" - "confidence man", rather than a thief. Since this was a prevalent quality in the region, the letters of the word "Aram" and "ramai" are the same^[3]. A ramai preys upon the basic human desire to gain something for nothing; he takes advantage of his victims by leading them to believe that they are getting the better part of a deal. Once the victims realize that they have been fooled, it is too late and they have only themselves to blame.

The basic quality which predisposes a person to becoming a ramai is not necessary evil. In order to be a successful ramai, a person must possess an inordinate degree of sensitivity, allowing him to perceive the needs and desires of his fellow man. A ramai uses his keen sensitivity to the disadvantage of his victims. It is this predisposition which our Patriarch Avraham and our Matriarchs Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, all of Aramean descent, incorporate into Bnei Yisroel, and which provides Bnei Yisroel with the sensitivity to perform chesed - acts of kindness, the very fabric of our nation, in the correct manner. True chesed stems from the ability to recognize the needs and feelings of the recipient. The danger that accompanies this trait is the ability to take advantage of one's fellow man. The antidote to this potential threat is offered in the historical synopsis recited by

the Jewish farmer.

After recording our Aramean experience, which was critical for it incorporated into Bnei Yisroel the sensitivities inherent in the region, the Torah recounts our descent into slavery. A slave is, by very definition, a person whose existence hinges upon his substantiating himself through his work. Creating a strong work ethic which demands we substantiate everything that is given to us was the only manner to safeguard us from using our new-found talents in a malevolent manner. Ingraining into the very being of the Jewish people that we will accept only those gains for which we have worked, and revile benefiting from others undeservedly, was a necessary progression to prevent the nation from becoming the tricksters and confidence men of society.

Yaakov is aware of the "ramai" quality inherent in the people of Aram. Seeing the shepherds lounging around the well in the middle of the day reflects this trait, which, if used malevolently breeds laziness and encourages a person to seek short-cuts in the manner of his livelihood. What he is teaching them when he enters the city is that by improving their work ethic they can utilize this quality in the greatest possible manner, being sensitive to the needs of others.

1. Devarim 26:1, See Rashi verse 5

2. 29:2,7, See Rashi verse 4

3. See Rashi 29:12, 29:18