

KING DAVID TOOK HIS PRECEDENT FROM YAAKOV

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Vayechi

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 487 - Determining Date of Moshiach's Arrival Good Shabbos!

King David Took His Precedent From Yaakov

The Yalkut Shimoni writes on the words "The L-rd is my shepherd" [Tehillim Chapter 23:1] that herding sheep is among the most lowly of professions. Every day, the shepherd is working hard out in the field with his staff and backpack. Yaakov our Patriarch himself described what a hard job shepherding is: "By day scorching heat consumed me, and frost by night; my sleep drifted from my eyes" [Bereishis 31:40].

Why then does Dovid HaMelech [King David], in this most famous Psalm, compare the Almighty to a shepherd? Wouldn't we be surprised if we were to encounter a Psalm beginning with the words "Mizmor L'Dovid - The L-rd is my trash collector?"

The Medrash explains that Dovid HaMelech had precedent. Yaakov had already called the Almighty a shepherd, as it is written (in his blessing to Menashe and Ephraim in this week's parsha): "The L-rd who shepherds me (ha-roeh osi)" [Bereishis 48:15]. This Medrash implies that Yaakov's calling the Almighty a shepherd was itself a radical metaphor. Neither Avraham, or Yitzchak, nor even Yaakov, prior to this point, use this comparison. The use here is a chidush [novelty].

Yaakov was on his deathbed. He called his children in. This was one of his last opportunities to speak to his family. At this juncture in time, Yaakov suddenly decided to "break new ground" and refer to G-d as a shepherd. What is the meaning of this?

I saw a beautiful insight addressing this issue from Rav Matisyahu Solomon. In last week's parsha, Pharaoh asked Yaakov how old he was; Yaakov answered that he was 130 years old. But then Yaakov added something that Pharaoh did not explicitly ask: "Few and bad have been the days of

the years of my life, and they have not reached the life spans of my forefathers in the days of their sojourns." [Bereishis 47:8-9]

In his Torah commentary, the Ramba"n notes the strangeness of this dialogue. First of all, Pharoah's question to Yaakov was somewhat inappropriate, if not rude, as the first question he asks when he first meets his distinguished foreign guest, the father of his Viceroy. Yaakov's response is even more puzzling. Why does he complain to Pharoah? How does he even know that he won't live as long as his forefathers did?

The Ramba"n explains that Yaakov was actually primarily explaining, rather than complaining. Yaakov appeared exceedingly old, well beyond his actual age. Pharoah was astonished to see such an old looking man, because most people in that era did not live so long. Yaakov was a sight to behold. He looked like he must have been 180! Pharoah was startled at the peculiar sight and without thinking about diplomatic protocol, he blurted out "My gosh, how old are you?" Yaakov explained that he was not as old as he looked. He was actually "only" 130 years old, but he looked much older than he actually was because he had such a hard life.

The Daas Zekeinim m'Baalei HaTosfos claim that it was still not proper for Yaakov to utter the words "Few and bad have been the days of the years of my life." A Jew is not supposed to talk like that. The Heavenly response, so to speak, was: "You are complaining about your life? I saved you from Eisav and from Lavan. I returned Dina to you. I returned Yosef to you. How dare you complain that your years are few and bad?" The Medrash says that the number of words Yaakov uttered in this complaint (33 words) was deducted from his lifespan (33 years).

Rav Matisyahu Solomon explains that Yaakov is now on his deathbed. He is making an accounting for his soul (cheshbon hanefesh). He is reviewing the events of his life. Yaakov recalls that statement of complaint to Pharoah. It haunts him. On his deathbed, he realizes that it was not right to talk like that. "In retrospect, I see now that all that I had imagined was terrible and bad and bitter was in the end all for my welfare. I now see the Master of the World in a light in which I had never viewed Him before."

It was at this moment that Yaakov first saw the Almighty as his Shepherd. When the lamb strays from the flock, the shepherd comes and chases it back because he sees the wolf that is lurking in the background. The shepherd knows that if the lamb wanders off any farther, it will be killed by the fox or eaten by the wolf or attacked by the coyote. Sometimes the shepherd must even hit the lamb with his staff.

There are times when the sheep wants to take an extra drink of water, but it is time to leave and the sheep cannot figure out why the shepherd is not letting him drink more. Sometimes the sheep wants to graze a little longer in a particular spot, but the shepherd knows that it is dangerous there and forces the sheep to move on. The sheep does not always understand the shepherd.

Yaakov calls the L-rd "the one who has been my shepherd." Yaakov says, "I now understand and

comprehend the nature of what He was doing to me during all those years. He was being my shepherd and always had my benefit at heart. He was never cruel or mean. Rather than depriving me, He saved me."

How fitting is it that in the pasuk where Yaakov calls the L-rd his shepherd, the Hebrew word is not spelled in its "full form": Reish vov ayin hay. Rather, it is spelled without the vov as if it were written Ra-ah (reish ayin hay) meaning 'bad'. Ro-eh and Ra-ah are related. That which we perceive as bad (the ra-ah) is actually what the Shepherd (ro-eh) in His infinite, yet often humanly incomprehensible, wisdom and foresight knows is good for us.

This insight, which Yaakov Avinu gained on his deathbed, enabled him to be the first person in the history of mankind to call the Master of the Universe a Shepherd. And this then gave precedent to Dovid HaMelech to use the very same metaphor in the psalm beginning "Mizmor L'Dovid, Hashem Ro-ee lo echsar."

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas VaYechi are provided below:

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Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington.

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Yerushalayim.