THE ATTRIBUTE OF BEING "ALONE"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 483, Celebrating Thanksgiving. Good Shabbos!

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The Attribute of Being "Alone"

This week's parsha contains the pasuk: "And Yaakov remained alone and a man wrestled with him until dawn" [Bereishis 32:25]. The Medrash sees a connection between Yaakov remaining alone and the "Aloneness" of the Almighty. Even more strikingly, the Medrash states that Yaakov attained a stature that made him similar to the Ribono Shel Olam [Master of the Universe, i.e. G-d].

"And you shall walk in His ways" [Devorim 28:9] is one of the most fundamental mitzvos of the Torah. Emulating G-d's ways by acting merciful (as He is Merciful), acting compassionate (as He is Compassionate) and so forth, is a primary religious obligation and is the ultimate source for many of our responsibilities towards our fellow man.

The Medrash states that in this incident Yaakov achieved a significant spiritual accomplishment by imitating one of the Almighty's attributes. Regarding the Almighty, the pasuk says: "And Hashem ALONE will be exalted on that day [Yeshaya 2:17] and here in VaYishlach the pasuk says: "And Yaakov remained ALONE." At this moment Yaakov emulated the G-d-like attribute of being alone.

The thrust of the pasuk "And Hashem ALONE will be exalted" is that Hashem does not need anything or anybody else to exist. He can be alone and independent. Yaakov too demonstrates this ability of going it alone, of being able to survive by himself, as it were.

Rav Yeruchem states that this is a level that every person try to achieve. A person should try to reach completeness (shleimus) by himself without the necessity of relying on others.

Rav Yeruchem is not advising us to become hermits. Rather, Rav Yeruchem is giving an insight into the meaning of the teaching of a famous Mishneh. "Ben Zoma states: Who is the wise man? One who learns from everyone. Who is the strong man? One who conquers his evil inclination. Who is the wealthy man? One who is satisfied with his lot. Who is honored? One who honors creatures." [Avos 4:1].

What do all these four things have in common? The common denominator is that a person can achieve these goals without the help of others.

The Mishneh does not require a person to have a good teacher to become a wise man. That would make achieving wisdom dependent on someone outside oneself. The Mishneh precludes one from arguing, "I can't become a wise man, because I don't have a proper teacher." Pirkei Avos counters, "No. One can become a wise man on his own - providing he is ready to learn from everyone."

So it is with achieving strength. Strength does not have to be measured in relationship to another individual. ("I am stronger than he is.") One can be strong independently of everyone else in the world - provided one conquers his evil inclination. Strength is not dependent on comparisons. Strength is measured "bein adam l'atzmo" (between man and himself).

The same can be said regarding wealth. It has nothing to do with having more money than my neighbor. If that were the case, I could never be considered wealthy, for there is always someone richer. True wealth only depends on oneself (levado), alone and independent. I can be the richest person in the world if I am happy with my lot.

Finally, even honor, contrary to our expectations, can be achieved independently. Honor is not dependant on being given Shlishi or Shishi or Maftir. Honor is determined by whether one honors other creatures.

Rav Yeruchum points out as follows. This Mishneh is emphasizing that in order to achieve perfection, a person must be able to function in a vacuum - as a "levado" [one who is alone]. Wisdom, wealth, strength, and honor do not need outsiders to be measured or to be achieved. One achieves them through the attribute of being "alone."

Nothing Stands In The Way of One's Will

At the end of the parsha Shimeon and Levi made a deal with Shechem son of Chamor that they would allow him to marry their sister if he circumcised himself and all the other males of the city. The Torah testifies: "The youth did not delay doing the thing, for he wanted Yaakov's daughter..."

[Bereishis 34:19]

One cannot but be amazed at what Shechem accomplished. Virtually on the spot he circumcised himself and convinced every other male in the city to likewise have themselves circumcised. One is astonished at both the physical and diplomatic accomplishment of this young man. It is nothing short of mind-boggling. How did he manage to do this?

Rav Yeruchem states that the Torah explains how he managed it: "for he wanted Yaakov's daughter." He wanted to marry her so badly that nothing would stand in his way; whatever it took he would do. If he had to promise one resident a trip to Bermuda and another resident this and another resident that in order to convince them to allow themselves to be circumcised, that's what Shechem would promise. Whatever it took, he would get it done. Why? Because he wanted Yaakov's daughter.

If there was ever a proof that nothing stands in the way of one's personal desires, it is the actions of Shechem son of Chamor.

Rav Noach Weinberg tells a story indicating how one can bring another person to Torah commitment. What is the trick to be successful at 'kiruv'? Certain individuals have been successful in drawing hundreds and thousands of individuals back to Yiddishkeit. Other people cannot seem to accomplish anything in this area. What is the secret of those who succeed?

Rav Weinberg tells the story of a person who owned a nursing home. In the nursing home, 90% of the residents were non-Jews. He served them non-Kosher meat. However, he had three or four residents who were non-observant Jews. As the halacha [Jewish Law] requires, he would not serve these Jewish residents non-Kosher food. He prepared special Kosher meals for them.

One day the State inspector came to inspect the nursing home. One of the Jewish residents, an old woman, complained to the inspector that her food was not as good as everyone else's food. The inspector investigated and found out that there were in fact two menus. The inspector gave the owner of the home an ultimatum: "Either you acquiesce and give this woman the food she wants or I will shut down your home."

The owner went to the woman and told her that Kosher meat was better and healthier and more expensive than non-Kosher meat. None of his reasoned arguments made a difference. The woman was adamant, and insisted she wanted the non-kosher meat.

Finally, he began talking to the woman about religion. He told her that she would soon be meeting her Maker. He explained the concepts of reward and punishment in the afterlife to her. To make a long story short, he was successful, and she told the inspector she wanted the Kosher meat.

Rav Noach Weinberg asked the nursing home operator how he was successful in reaching and convincing this woman who was so set in her ways and who for so long had rejected Torah practices to suddenly say she wanted to only eat Kosher. The nursing home operator told him simply, "You don't understand. I HAD TO DO IT. If not, I would have lost my business."

Nothing stands in the way of a person's will. This is the key. The principle that "nothing stands in the way of a person's will" can move mountains. It can make a whole city circumcise themselves and it can make a lady in a nursing home decide that she in fact wants to keep kosher.

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 Vayishlach are provided below:

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