

RABBI FRAND ON PARSHAS VAYEITZEI

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Gematria of Ladder Equals Money

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 658, Aramaic. Good Shabbos!

At the beginning of this week's parsha, Yaakov must leave home, the house of his parents and the environment of "Yaakov the simple man who dwelled in the tent (of Torah learning)" and he must go to Charan, the country of his ancestors, to find an appropriate wife.

The Torah tells us that he needed to lie down, for the sun had set and he had a dream. This is the famous dream of the ladder based on the ground whose head reached towards Heaven, with Angels of G-d ascending and descending upon it.

The fact that Yaakov had this dream at this particular time, at this juncture in his life, is obviously telling us that Yaakov Avinu had to hear this message specifically now. He did not have this dream while he was growing up in the house of his father. He did not have this dream while he was learning in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever. Now, suddenly, on the way to the house of Lavan, he has this dream.

What is the significance of the ladder? The Baal HaTurim points out that the Hebrew word for ladder has the same numeric value as the Hebrew word for money (sulam b'gematria mammon). According to the Baal HaTurim, the image of the ladder is supposed to send a message to Yaakov Avinu about money. What is that message?

At this moment, Yaakov is going through a major transition. If we put it in modern day terms, he is going from the life of a "yeshiva bochur" into the "real world". In the house of his father, he sat and learned. He learned in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever for 14 years. He established a reputation as an "ish tam yoshev ohalim" - a pure man, who sits in the tents (of learning). He had no worries of finances. He did not need to make a living. He did not need to worry about a family. He lived the life of a Yeshiva student - a life that can be devoted to spiritual growth and self improvement. Now he was going into the "real world", one that would not be as cloistered and insulated as that of the Yeshiva. He is going to need to deal with Lavan, the quintessential con-man.

The message of ladder = money is that Yaakov's success in the "real world" would hinge on how he

would deal with that issue that stays with us for most of our adult lives - how we deal with making a living. This issue can become the focus of a person's life. It can overtake a person and upset him and his spiritual goals in life.

Life is like this ladder - there can be tremendous ascent and there can be tremendous descent. It depends to a very large extent on how one deals with the issue of money. It is not inevitable that when one leaves Yeshiva, his spiritual growth may be over and everything spiritual may be "down-hill from now on."

On the contrary, a person can grow through challenge and adversity. When he recognizes the challenges and the lack of the peace of mind that he had in his youth, if a person can cope with those difficulties and grow under those situations, then he can ascend rather than descend. He can rise from the ground to the heaven! If on the other hand, he allows the challenges of earning a living to consume him, then a person can suffer tremendous spiritual descent. That is why at this moment and at this juncture in his life, Yaakov has the dream of the ladder.

Rav Moshe Feinstein makes a similar comment in his sefer *Darash Moshe*. Rav Moshe buttresses this idea with support from a Gemara (Chullin 91b). The Talmud says that when Yaakov Avinu reached Charan, he asked himself: "Is it possible that I passed the place where my fathers prayed and I neglected to pray there?" He returned and at that point "the place jumped toward him".

Rav Moshe said that we are familiar with the concept of "kefitzas haderech" [the road jumps] from elsewhere. When Eliezer went from Canaan to Charan he had a "kefitzas haderech" - he made it back and forth in one day. However, every place where this idea is mentioned in the Talmud, it refers to someone travelling a journey in a shorter than expected time. However, the "kefitzas haderech" of Yaakov is unique. He did not travel at all. All of a sudden, G-d took Mt. Moriah and brought it to Yaakov in Charan.

This is a miraculous "jumping of the place" that is not found anywhere else in the Talmud. The symbolism of this, says Rav Moshe, is that it is possible to have the Beis HaMikdash in Charan. You can be stuck in Galus [exile] with Lavan the con man for twenty years, constantly dealing with a boss who is trying to short change and cheat you, but you can have the Temple Mount there with you at the same time.

Yaakov was successful at having the Beis HaMikdash with him in Charan. In next week's parsha, he says "with Lavan I resided (garti)" to which the Rabbis add "and I kept the 613 (taryag) commandments without picking up his evil traits." Yaakov was successful at bridging the gap between the tents of Shem and Ever and the business environment of Lavan. He brought the Temple to him in the place where he was working.

In Pesachim [88a], we are taught that each of the patriarchs referred to the place of the Temple in a different terminology. Avraham called it a mountain; Yitzchak called it a field; but Yaakov called it a "house". Avraham saw it as a place that was difficult to ascend. Yitzchak saw it as a lonely field.

Yaakov, however, was successful in making the Beis Hamikdash his house. Applying the thought of Rav Moshe -- he was successful in bringing the Beis Hamikdash to him in Charan, and infusing his daily life there with holiness.

This is a challenge for each and every one of us.

I used to tell my students that their years in Yeshiva were the "best years of their lives". I recently received a letter from a former student who complained about that. "How could you tell us that? Should we assume that the next 40 or 50 years of our life are all down-hill?" No one says you are over the hill at 24!

I have refined my mussar lecture to my students since receiving this letter. It may not be the best years of their life; it is just the easiest years of their life. It is the easiest time in a person's life to grow and to study and to become a more spiritual person. But it does not end there. >From there on out, it becomes difficult - like a ladder, one must ascend step by step carefully and with exertion. However, is a tremendous accomplishment to continue to grow, in spite of all that is thrown at you. The years in Yeshiva are the easiest, but not necessarily the best. Which are the best depends on what one makes of his subsequent challenges while facing the "outside world".

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 Vayeitzei are provided below:

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